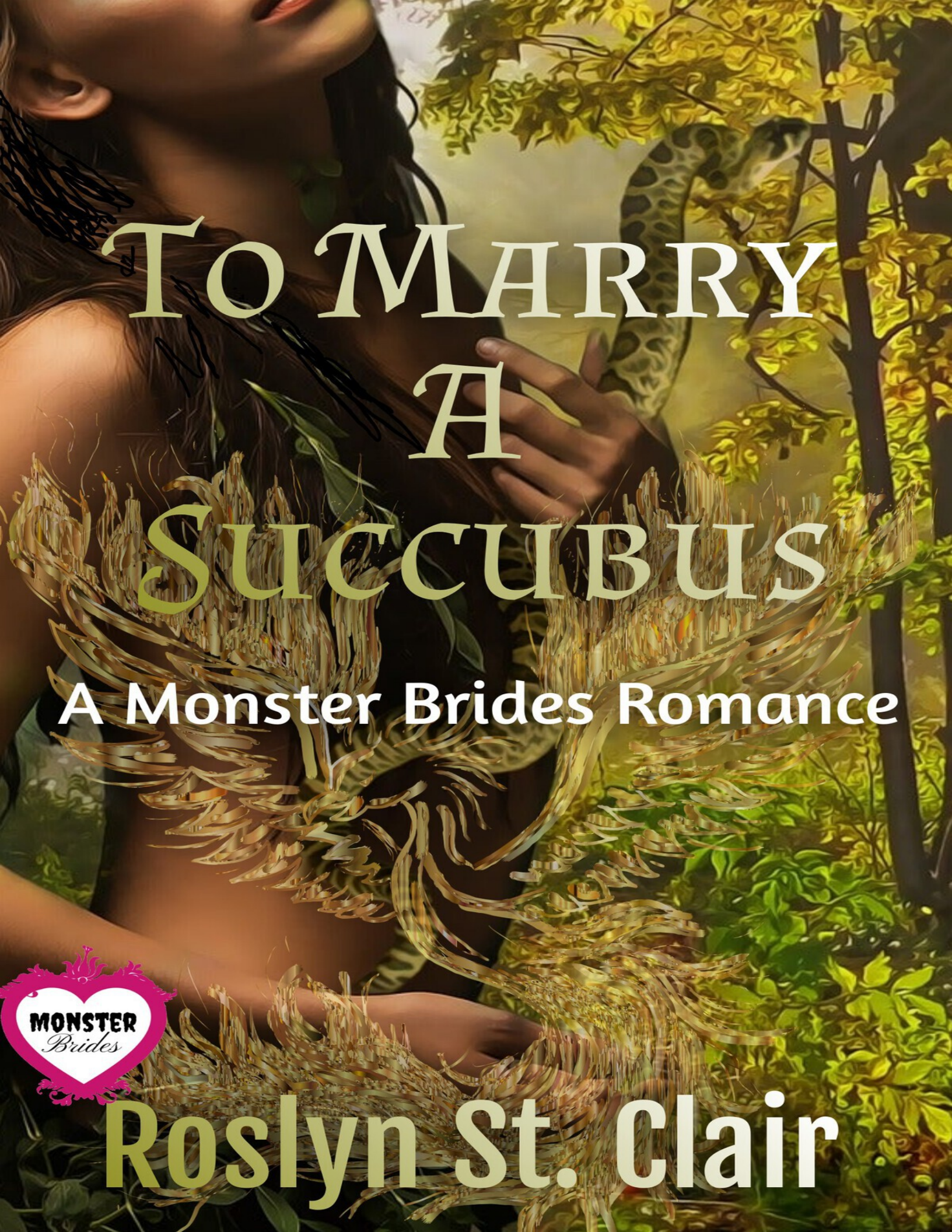




TO MARRY A SUCCUBUS

A Monster Brides Romance



Roslyn St. Clair

TO MARRY A SUCCUBUS

A Monster Brides Romance

Roslyn St. Clair

Copyright © 2024 Roslyn St. Clair

Copyright 2024, Roslyn St. Clair, All Rights Reserved

All Rights reserved

No part or whole of this work may be reproduced, transmitted, distributed, or otherwise made available to any person or entity (including any search entity, book purveyor, or similar organizations), in any form (including but not limited to optical, digital, tangible, electronic, mechanical or other) without the express advance permission of the copyright holder.

Edited by the fabulous Evil Commas

Cover Art by: darksouls1 from Pixabay, through Bookbrush.com

All characters and situations are solely the result of the author's imagination, and any crossover to this world and reality, or the people operating within it, is purely coincidental. Of course, as the old gods might tell you, there are no accidents, but only synchronicity. Any imagined connection might just be a sign directing you toward a greater truth: we are all archetypes, with more similarity than difference.

For more information, please contact author at Roslynstclair@yahoo.com

Additionally, for anyone interested, the story crosses over and draws the world and characters from the Fated Archangels series.

Trigger Warnings: This is a darker paranormal Monster Romance with scenes of graphic sex and some violence. Possible dubious consent. Strong language.

*Dedicated to Carol R. H. – the most hopeful
person I know. I treasure our friendship, even though
this book will likely horrify you.*

*Be careful when you cast out your demons that you don't throw
away the best of yourself. -- Friedrich Nietzsche*

C HAPTER ONE:

Louisiana; Present Day; Night

He lived among demons. Most of them were human. Some weren't.

Kneeling beside his brother's hacked remains, Solon roared his pain at the sky. The sound bounced off the verdant green of the damp jungle and disappeared like a static breath.

Not this. Anything but this.

He inhaled the sticky, sweet odor of the carnage that dyed the earth and his knees red. Insects swarmed to lap the ichor, some of them alighting upon his skin to drink his sweat. It didn't matter. He swatted them from his brother's corpse, but they quickly returned to their feast. Everywhere he looked, they buzzed, even upon the fleshy logs of his other fallen brethren scattered across the brush.

A fierce, sharp fire burned in Solon's chest, a complicated flame born of despair and pride. Not all the corpses were Veritas men. Some were the enemy tribe. Some were Other, sent from Hell to stop their quest.

The only good demon was a dead demon. Bonus points if the creature had screamed in agony before succumbing, even if the fallen human body it had occupied had been sinless, taken for a ride into death by one of Hell's citizens. He had killed three of them. His instructor would be proud. His brother, though—his brother had always cried for the loss of those doomed by possession.

Stop it.

Ruthlessly, he pushed his doubts aside. They had no place in the trampled green, especially now that the burden of leadership fell square upon his shoulders.

But before he could round up his remaining men and set a retreat, a siren's sweet call forced his attention to his right. A haunting serenade echoed from deep within the foliage. "Solon. Solon, come to me. Come."

A trill of musical notes cleaved what remained of his broken heart. The beauty inflamed his senses and needled him to investigate.

Stumbling to his feet, he began hacking through the growth. He ignored the green trails wrapping his calves, pushing forward until he broke into a clearing.

Though he swiped at his eyes, the scene remained the same. Upon the flattened grasses, a crimson tapestry stretched. Tables heaped with platters of fruits and decanters of wine lined the edges. A four-poster bed draped in netting centered upon the rug. Seated within the folds, a stunning woman dressed in a diaphanous white gown beckoned him with a smile. Her white skin ran to sloe eyes, cherry lips, and raven hair. Her curves made his palms itch.

She held out a graceful hand. "Come, Solon de Sai. Do not fear. Let me trade your misery for pleasure."

Heart hammering like a drum, he stalked closer, allowing his blade to dangle uselessly at his side. She needed his help. He didn't know how he knew it, only that he did, and he had long ago vowed to protect the innocent. And such perfection had to be uncorrupted.

When he drew near the bed, the perfect woman reached for his weapons belt. It fell to the carpet with a clunk as she held his gaze. After pulling his shirt free, she caressed his heated skin with her cool hands.

With a sigh, he dropped his blade.

Slowly, she stood. She rolled his clothing from his body with practiced ease, kneeling to draw off his boots. When he was naked, she grabbed him around his thighs and held him secure as she wrapped her full red lips around his raging cock.

A shudder ran through him as her warm, wet tongue glided along his erection. An ache caverned within him, the hunger growing as she gently cupped his balls. Groaning, he wrapped his fingers through her silken hair to hold her in place and took control. Withdrawing to the tip, he

plunged deep. The edge of her teeth grazed him, and his entire body pulsed. He rammed his cock deep down her throat. The play of her muscles constricting around him drew his cum. Holding back, sweat springing to his brow, he growled with the exquisite pleasure coursing through his blood.

The sound of his own voice acted like a slap across his face. A bed, a beautiful woman, one made exactly to his liking, in a clearing in a jungle, with death poised all around?

Instinct took over. In one swift motion, he pushed her off of his cock. When she splayed upon the carpet, he grabbed his blade and centered the sharpened point beneath her chin. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

A wobbly smile spread her lips. “Each time, you ask the same question, Solon de Sai. Can’t you please, just this once, give in?”

“Your. Name.” The point drew blood. A trickle leached down the blade’s silver edge.

“Vella. But you know this.”

Her soft voice sent a shiver of ice down his spine as memories resurfaced. Yeah. He knew her. She had visited him every night for the last month. And every night she tempted him, offering him a brief respite from his gut-wrenching true memories in exchange for his soul.

A sour wash of acid tasted in his mouth. Demon. A fucking demon in her own flesh, not taking another body for a joyride. Had to be. She was too perfect.

He retreated, but she followed, graceful as she rose to her feet, the sway of her hips beating in his blood like a crazy drum serenade. Her hands spread as if to beg him.

He gathered what was left of his wits and ignored his throbbing cock and aching balls. “Reveal yourself, demon.”

She spread her hands wider and smiled.

“You’re a succubus. Show me.”

Utterly composed, though a trace of resignation crossed her perfect features, she nodded. As she did so, her long black tresses swished against her white shoulders, drawing his attention down to where her body lay clearly revealed through the diaphanous material she wore. Pink nipples. Smooth mound between luxuriant thighs. A deep curve at her waist.

He swallowed, hunger racing to blot out his thoughts. What had he wanted?

“As you wish, Solon de Sai.”

The see-through gown disappeared along with her legs as her limbs melted into one violet-green expanse of reflective leathery scales. The tip of her tail waved behind her, the narrower red protrusion at its end rattling like a viper’s warning. It looked like a vibrating cock. He grabbed his blade and lifted it in front of him. In response, she held up her hands. Her pinkies pulsed in time with her tail.

As he reared back, impossibly hard, his gaze traced the movements of her tail. Slithering toward him, she wrapped the sinuous length up and around his thigh, the tip coming to rest at the crack between his ass cheeks.

Fuck.

“I can give you pleasure of a kind you’ve never dreamt, Solon de Sai. You can enter me while I enter you. I can fill you even as you release all the spiraled, dark longing into my cave. I can wring you dry of your terrible memories.”

What the fuck was wrong with him? She was evil. A monster.

Her beauty played in him like a melody.

“Succubus.” He hissed the word, caught between hatred and surrender.

She laid her vibrating pinkies against his chest. Electrical arcs flooded his skin, boiling his blood.

He was so close to surrender; he could taste defeat. He reached out to touch her skin— and grabbed her by the throat. “I will kill you before I

let you take my soul.” His voice rasped through a throat grown too tight.

Her mouth gaped like a fish out of water as he tightened his hold. Even as she tried to pull free of his hand, her soft violet tail pressed its velvety tip to his anus. He clenched his ass muscles against the intrusion, but the need to let her in nearly overwhelmed him again. His fingers loosened. Maybe, just once. What could it hurt if he...

Waves of wanting crashed over him. His muscles loosened. Her tail split his knotted hole and pushed inside. An inch. Two. As the stretch of his muscles brought tears to his eyes, her lids fluttered, and her head lolled back as if she could sense everything he was feeling.

A deep growl rumbled in his throat as he coiled with the titillation. The uncomfortable edge of pain mixed with sharp, deep pleasure as she pressed another knuckle deep. His knees buckled. Inside him, heat and hunger spiraled higher and higher. Her pinkies again vibrated against his heart as she drew back—and plunged deep.

Every fiber in his being arched with the ecstasy. His seed drew back in the moment before release. His eyes shut and opened.

Opened on dark hair and sloe eyes, his every fantasy made flesh.

Succubus.

With a roar, his hand gripped in her hair. He spun her around and out of him, then threw her across the rug. She landed in a splayed heap of lavender tail and white skin, her dark hair covering her face.

“Go back to Hell, succubus.” He gritted the words between his gnashed teeth. His empty ass ached and flexed, missing the feel of her inside him. He had to push out his words. “I banish you.”

With a swirl of gray, Solon rose from the dream. His cock strained toward the ceiling as he opened his eyes and panted from his narrow escape. His body felt strangely empty.

C HAPTER TWO:

King's Garden Palace, Hell, Some hours later

In the pre-dawn hours, while Hell slept off its revelry, Vella dug a small hole under ornate copper gates and stole into Lucifer's garden. Starvation had rounded her belly back against her spine, allowing her to easily fit.

Had the devil been in residence, nothing above or below-shell could have induced her to enter his sacred space, not even threat of the Punishing, but since his brother, Michael, now sat upon the throne, certain risks could be taken. Besides, rumor said the Heaven-spawn spent most of his time at the palace on the Sea of Elicher. He might not even know he had a garden in the capital city.

She needed a flower. Just one. Dom, her boss, had promised her half his monthly essence for a bluemyrad bloom. Half of his haul would be enough to see her through an entire month, maybe more if she was careful, which just might be long enough to allow her to escape her future.

Vella gazed around at the variety of diffuse shapes and shades of gray. The jar of firebugs she carried barely creased the darkness, but she couldn't risk the brighter glowstick until she rounded the third curve in the path where Dom had told her the flower grew. Marvelous scents, sweet and spicy by turns, wafted to her nose. A moist heat licked against her skin, tempting her to linger.

Pleasure of any kind was so foreign that it proved hard to resist. What would it be like to sink down upon the bench and rest among such beauty and peace without the threat of the Punishing or death hanging over her head? Would she ever...?

The sound of shifting stone from behind her sent her surging forward around another bend. The third ring. Maybe. Removing the glass filled with luminescent Scrog blood from her pocket, she kept the light low and searched the wavering flowers. The pink ones to her right appeared to have teeth.

Keeping to the center of the path, she pressed on, her limbs shaking. At least with legs, she could wear shoes. The sharp stones would have shredded her tail.

Another noise behind her made her spin. She lifted her glowstick and gasped. Pedaling backwards, she fell onto her butt. “No! Oh, I... oh!”

Before she could scramble up and away, two dark-skinned feet bracketed her hips. Masculine and strong, encased by loose leather sandals, they ran up to blue silk pajama pants hugged tight to muscular thighs. Above the low waistband rose a narrow waist, wide bare chest, and long expanse of throat. A firm and dimpled chin led to pillowed lips, a straight nose, high, prominent cheekbones, dark curled hair, and celestial blue eyes so bright, they shone like lanterns in the night.

Michael. He looked just like he did in his paintings that were strung up on every street sign of Hell, minus the sword and halo.

As she studied her death, her heart beating so hard it appeared ready to burst out of her chest, he bent and plucked her from the dirt and stone. A slow smile spread his lips. “You’ve got to love a synchronic universe. To coin a human phrase, you are just what the doctor ordered, little succubus.”

Ten minutes later, she sat beside him on the bench, pouring out her tale over a glass of chilled white wine. Though she should be terrified—was terrified—a strange sense of serenity also filled her. Maybe it was him, the archangel. Maybe it was just that she had never been served chilled white wine before. She had never been served anything at all.

She took another sip of the delicious, cold liquid and continued her tale. “Except for one rather virile man who hates me, I’m only assigned old men with little essence. Some of them are already dead by the time they make my list.” She peeped at the archangel before admitting, “It’s almost as if my superiors want me to fail.”

“Or one does, at any rate. He or she will likely have been bought off by the demon who will take charge of you once you are fired and sent to the Punishing.”

“Do you think so?” He sounded so certain.

Michael smiled. “I’d be surprised if it were otherwise.” He sipped from his glass and leaned back against a strong-barked tree. A wispy vine trailed over his shoulder and down his chest. He ignored the caress as he continued to study her.

Maybe he didn’t feel it. Who knew what archangels sensed. Should she tell him? Warn him?

Shaking her head, she forced her attention back to his incredible, excoriating eyes. “I need to collect some essence soon, enough that they can’t fire me, which is why I’m here. Dom, the head of ISO, promised me half his monthly allotment of essence for a bluemyrad. If I can’t get it, I’ll go to the Punishing, probably tomorrow, there to mate with anyone they choose, punisher or punishee, as reward or torture.” A shiver traced her spine, icy cold. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “I’ll feel it, King Michael. I will be in my real body, not just projecting, and....”

“And if you take my flower?”

Without thinking, she grabbed the trailing vine and threw it from his chest. It screamed in frustration and left tiny marks of blood along his dark skin. He raised his right brow, skewering her to the bench.

“Sorry. I’m...” She tried not to flinch. She had just touched an archangel without permission. The current king of Hell. He could reach forth a lazy hand and smite her into ash.

Though he continued to rest against the tree, his energy coiled around her, waiting. It prickled against her skin. “And if...?”

She breathed deeply and tried to steady her heart. “If I take a flower to Dom and make the trade for essence, I can buy time. Jax of the Jarmond clan is considering my application to be his wife. I think—that is, I have some hope he will accede. He has eight children who need care, and he’s pretty low in hierarchy, even within his clan. His choices are few. But then, so are mine. At least I won’t be...” Tortured. Except, she would be,

but only by one man, once she passed through the Ceremony of Blood and Seed. Her glass dropped to rest against her thigh, icing her skin. “If Solon de Sai had just given in, I would have enough time without the flower. His essence is top shelf. He's young, virile, handsome. And he's honorable, too – but he hates demons.”

The king's brow quirked, and a knowing expression entered his blue eyes. “Handsome? Do succubae care about such things?” Amusement lined his deep voice.

“Not usually. No,” she admitted softly, shifting on her seat. Because even if it mattered to some like Jeralyn, who booked so much essence each month, she was rounding to fat, but who also had her choice of men because of it, it couldn't matter to her. Only the successful could afford to be picky.

Michael nodded and twisted his glass in his strong fingers. “Solon de Sai. He leads Veritas, an organization created under my name. Exempting some moments in the 1860s, it has done much good in my name.” He smiled and leaned toward her. “As I said. Synchronicity.” He lifted his gaze to the distance where Hell's dawn-fires sparked against the firmament. His chin bobbed from side to side as he considered his next words. “What I tell you must remain a secret from all in Hell. Can I trust you?”

She bit her lips between her teeth.

He must have taken the gesture as assent. “Before Lucifer passed the final seal of kingship to me, he took my sword. He feared I would grow too powerful as heir to Heaven while already sitting upon Hell's throne. He's warded my blade with spells to prevent me from grabbing it back, though I know where it rests.” Michael leaned in further, his eyes sparkling. “My brother imagined I might enjoy the feel of a throne beneath my ass so well, I would be tempted to wrest control of all the realms.” Suddenly, he laughed. “And who's to say the serpent wasn't right? Who better than he to understand temptation?”

Another sudden chill iced her veins. Archangels were canny creatures. Though Michael had treated her well so far, there was no telling when or if he might shift to violence.

His laugh stilled. He reached out to feather her hair behind her ear. “Do not worry, little succubus. I have no plans just yet for universal domination. I just need my sword.” His free palm flexed as he opened and closed his fingers. “I miss the heft. I miss the extra power.” He paused and took a sip of his drink. He looked as if he were considering his next words before he spoke them. “I shall make you a deal. You will go to your Solon and convince him to undertake a quest to recapture my sword. It should be easy as he and Veritas already search for it. When he hands it to me, if you still desire it, I shall give you your flower. Agreed?”

Sudden exhausted tears sprang to her eyes. For the last month, she hadn’t eaten more than an insect, and the need to deal wisely with the archangel left her shaking. She swiped at her eyes as a bereft feeling filled her. Because, no—she couldn’t convince Solon. She couldn’t convince him of anything.

Hell’s current king offered her a square of linen. “I give you hope, little succubus. Don’t despair.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed, taking the fabric and dotting her eyes. “But what you ask doesn’t provide hope. Solon hates all demons, especially me. I’ll just fail again.” She made the admission in a whisper, afraid to rile Hell’s king.

“Nonsense. I can’t imagine a man who could hate you. You scream vulnerability, which is a siren’s call to any man worth his armor.” He stroked his huge hand over her hair, down her arm, letting it come to rest upon her thigh. “Is it your tail? I have a few succubae in my harem, and the pleasure they can wring from me with their vibrating parts is insane, but I can understand how a mortal might be frightened.” He laughed suddenly. “They’re a prudish lot, as a whole.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. He sends me away after I begin a connection. He really does despise all demons.”

Michael drew straight. “My fault, I’m afraid. Tell him I sent you. I may sit on Hell’s throne, but I am of Heaven, and this is my will.” His gaze raked her from head to toe. “Your Solon has bedded many women in his life. He won’t tumble for a mere dream fantasy. Speaking as one who

was until relatively recently incorporeal, flesh wants flesh.” He stroked the line of her cheekbone with his thumb before sitting back.

The sense of futility swamped her again. She shook her head. “Then I’ll go to the Punishing before....” A sob erupted from her lips. She pressed it back. “I e-even k-kept myself p-pure for marriage.”

“Did you?” Michael tilted his head. “You would undergo the Ceremony of Blood and Seed rather than return home? Surely, your clan would take you back rather than see you go to the Punishing?”

“No. My father disowned me when I refused to go to the Sereth clan as a vessel.” She had burned her bridges. All of them, except the chance the lowly Jax would agree to her offer of marriage. Her ego, never strong, shred more each day he waffled. She straightened and tipped her chin higher. No sense whining more to the archangel. He would never understand. “No, I’m afraid my only hope is success with the flower, or with Solon, or with Jax.”

“Or all three.” He stroked her cheek again. “It is no easy thing to fight against destiny, and it is often painful. However, the universe is built upon courage. Everything Light depends upon it.” Michael looked toward the dawning sky before glancing back. “Fulfill my quest and have your bluemyrad, and perhaps you’ll seduce Solon on your journey. If so, you’ll have more than enough essence to give you some space and time to form a reasoned decision, which would be better than what you’re doing now.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re running from what you don’t want toward something that will likely be worse. This is your chance to escape your destiny.” He placed his hand upon her knee. The feel of his power set her skin rippling. Without thought, her legs resolved into her tail, her shoes falling empty to the stones. The tip quivered toward him as her pinkies thrummed, instinct and something more directing it. A feeling of intense unease swept through her. If he wanted her, this king, how was she to say no?

He smiled again. “Delightful. I could almost wish I was not otherwise engaged.”

She managed to swallow. “You mean...”

“I mean, sometimes, a man who kills monsters can be seduced by one. Take my quest. Take your chance with Solon de Sai.” His words commanded as he removed his hand. “There is no happy ending to be found without first traveling through the witches’ forest.”

Witches’ forest?

He waved his hand. “A metaphor for a dangerous journey. But peril makes the reward so much sweeter, don’t you think?”

Slowly, she nodded. What other choice did she have but agree?

“Wonderful.” He whispered all the instructions she would need, careful to make her commit them to memory. When he finished, he sat back. “Understood?”

As she fell to the floor, she nodded and placed her lips upon her king’s feet in the classic sign of subservience. Small, sharp stones cut into her delicate tail, but she ignored the pain. Her heart beat so fast with dread and possibility that she feared it would fly out of her chest.

C HAPTER THREE

Diffusing her body so she blended with the umbra, Vella hid in the shadows of Solon's elegantly appointed bedroom. She lacked physicality above-shell, but a charge could always spot his succubus if he glanced the right way. It was why she chose to keep her legs rather than switch to a more convenient tail. Most men fell to the joys of a succubus's rear appendage, but some were too mired in conventionality to take the opportunity for what it was. Like Solon. Maybe.

Michael had concluded their conversation with a wave of his hand. Rather than entering Solon's dream, she had landed in his bedroom.

Odd, but no odder than anything else that had transpired in Lucifer's garden.

Across the width of an Oriental tapestry hugged to the dark wood boards, an enormous four-poster bed squatted in gilded splendor. Soft cream-colored silk had been laid under a midnight-blue comforter, velvety and tactile. Above the blanket, the modern-day warrior slept the restless sleep of the wise, his muscled limbs splayed, inviting her caress. From his golden hair to his piercing gray eyes to his perfectly shaped penis lying flaccid across his broad thigh... every part of him sang to her.

If only she could touch him. A succubus entered the dreaming state, nothing but an image of her true form projected into a charge's mind. Vella could no more feel Solon's body than a silent note held too long between keys. Still. A girl could visualize. A girl could dream of her own captured heart. Not that it mattered. She had a job to do.

A wave of heat washed through her. She took a deep breath to steady her longings. Though she couldn't feel him, he would believe he could touch her. This time, she had to tempt him into both giving up his essence and undertaking King Michael's quest. Once more for the Gipper,

as Henry, her eighty-nine-year-old, had shouted at his final ejaculation yesterday. It had been an abbreviated pop rather than a nourishing stream.

Her stomach rumbled with the memory.

Solon groaned and flipped his head. His legs and arms battled before dropping like they were made of stone. Even in his dreams, he fought. Focusing, Vella approached the bed. Crawling over him, she melded with his body and dove into his dream.

The same dream. The same one she had interrupted over and over again, the one where he relived his brother's death in the savage jungle at the hands of a native tribe. Around them, bodies littered the reddening earth. With a hack of his machete, Solon repaid the favor, sending Horolith of the Hanoberian clan screaming back to Hell. The soul of the native tribesman he had ridden hopefully went elsewhere. She wouldn't wish the Punishing on anyone.

A tentative bubble of hope rose in Vella's chest for the first time. Maybe, since both Solon and Michael already sought Michael's sword, the human would finally give in? Synchronicity. It might work in her favor.

The succubae guidebook, *The Taking of Man*, suggested, under the classification Warrior: Defeat, that seduction would prove most effective once acid dejection stripped the subject to the bone. It said a warrior, offered hope of victory after crushing defeat, would cling to the succubus offering it with every shred of his soul. Judging by Solon's movements and pained cries, her moment was at hand.

If Solon gave her the chance. He was more apt to strike before listening.

When he kicked out again, his leg shot through her, demonstrating the one benefit of incorporeality. She closed her eyes and waited for the final meld with his mind.

It never came. Instead, he flipped her over, his hand closing around her throat. Instinctively, she grabbed for his wrist with both hands, but he was made of muscle and steel, lethal down to his soul. And his skin—she could feel the soft curling golden hairs on his arm. How?

“Who the fuck are you?” He gritted the words between his teeth. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Pain radiated in all directions from where he squeezed. She couldn’t breathe.

Panic gripped her, sending confusion on a holiday while she fought to resist him. She clawed at his face, leaving red marks on his golden skin. Letting go with one hand, he grabbed her wrists and grappled them together as his other hand fell from her neck, only to press down upon her chest, crushing her in place.

A fiery agony rang through her from head to toe. “Please.” The word croaked against her raw throat, barely escaping into the air. “I can’t... you’re h-hurting me.”

The pressure lessened slightly. “Who are you, and what are you doing here? Talk—or you won’t speak again.” Chilled menace leached the color from his eyes. They glittered like silver in the low moonlight seeping through the open draperies.

The velvet coverlet stroked the back of her calf as she struggled. It was as soft as she had imagined. Above her, he was even more unmalleable and unyielding. Her fingers skimmed his bicep, testing his strength and reality. How? Not only was she touching him, feeling him, but he was touching her—and he was awake, too, not dreaming.

Michael’s work. It had to be. But if the archangel thought he was giving her an advantage, he was wrong. Solon might kill her before she could ever tell him of the quest.

“Talk!” He grabbed her up as if she weighed no more than feathers and pushed her back against the gilded headboard.

She licked her lips. “Okay. All right. Here’s the thing – I don’t...”

He growled. A tic sparked beneath his eye.

“My name is Vella! No last name, like one of your topside singers.” Twisting her hands within his grasp, she laid her palms against the bunched muscles of his chest. They rippled as his face resolved into

lines of intransigent will. She sighed and winced before admitting, “I’m a succubus.”

His lips curled, and he pushed her harder against the headboard. “Demon!”

“Yes. Technically.” Beneath her fingers, his heart raced. She could see her death in his eyes. “But I’m also an individual with my own hopes and dreams. Characterizing me only by my genus would be rude and speciesist.”

Disgust warped his even features, but some of the ferocity melted. His voice was almost gentle when he said, “Hopes and dreams are for idiots, demon. I’ve given them up as a bad bet.”

“Because of your brother. You dream of him every night.”

Her sympathy launched him from the bed. “You.” He pointed a finger at her, accusation and horror mixed in his voice. “You’re the one who’s been trying to steal my soul.”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t want your soul. I want... will you let me explain?”

His hands opened and closed as if debating whether to make fists with which to beat her. “Make it fast.”

She inhaled roughly. The air scratched her sore throat. “Temptation is my job, but I collect essence, sexual energy, not souls. Your name is on my list, and you’re my one chance of avoiding being sent to the Punishing because I’m really bad at my job, all my other charges are old men with little essence, and I’m... starving.” Her stomach rumbled as if to confirm her words. “I-I need you.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Too bad. I don’t fuck evil.”

“The line isn’t so black and white.” She picked at her red dress, the same one she had worn to slither under Lucifer’s copper gates. Streaks of dirt probably stretched across her backside. Some sort of rubbery substance dotted the front. She folded the fabric to hide the stain and looked back up at him. “I have no idea what to do now. I only appear in dreams above-shell, but it seems I have physicality. This is new to me,

too.” A sob wrenched from her throat, surprising her, though it shouldn’t. She was tired beyond living. Even if this warrior killed her, it couldn’t be worse than her life.

He straightened, his hands unfisting. In the next instant, he was beside her, dragging her up by the shoulders until she stood in front of him. He was so tall that she barely reached his chest.

“Tears? Is this a whore’s trick?”

“No. I’m just...” A shudder tripped over her skin, but whether from the heat of his touch upon her arms, or the chill of her inevitable future, she didn’t know. Maybe both. “I’m scared.” Her voice trembled. She swallowed her fear back. “ISO must have made a mistake adding you to my list. Either that, or they knew you couldn’t be tempted. Giving the appearance of fairness while being blatantly unfair is one of Hell’s favorite tricks.” Though she hadn’t remembered it until this moment. When she looked up at him again, his features swam because of her tears. “I’m sorry, Solon. You’re my only hope.”

His face twisted at the notion, but his hands gentled. “ISO?”

“Incubus Succubus, Org.” A mad gust of laughter raced through her. “They assign me old men, but you’re young, virile, and... well.” Her fingers traced the skin of his abdomen. “Magnificent.”

“I don’t lie with demons.” But his grip tightened on her arms, and his eyes warmed.

She couldn’t help it. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his jaw, tasting his skin with her tongue. Slightly salty. Fresh, like spring water. And the scent of him—why had she never considered how he would smell? Like fir trees and oranges.

“Please,” she whispered against him as he gulped. “One orgasm. It’s all I ask.”

His hands jerked, and with a roar, he pushed her away. She landed back upon the bed and scrambled to sit upright.

“Whore.”

The insult hit her in the chest. “I’m not a whore.” She clambered off the furniture, but her legs twisted in a hanging sheet. The floor would have punched her in the nose if he hadn’t caught her. His hands curled around her arms again, the fir and orange scent of him enveloping her like a warm hug, temporarily soothing the hollow ache that had taken root deep inside her.

“Steady.” But when he stepped away, a series of conflicting emotions passed across his expressive face. Disdain. Horror. Loathing. Interest?

As in attraction?

Hope raised its tentative head again.

Maybe he wasn’t the lost cause she had believed. Maybe there was still a chance to seduce him, although she wasn’t entirely clear whether she wanted to be wrapped in his arms and feel his embrace for the sake of work—or the sake of her fast-beating heart. His touch still pulsed against her skin though he stood some feet away. It was as if she had been marked so she could feel him even when he wasn’t touching her.

He might be too good for someone like her, but a girl could dream, couldn’t she?

A girl could borrow five minutes out of a long, wrenched life.

C HAPTER FOUR

“The devil sent you for my soul. Admit it.”

Vella laughed, earning a puzzled look from the warrior before her. He couldn't know Lucifer had less interest in a human soul than he did in slugworms. All the devil cared about was his new bride, and unless Solon moved against Queen Rose, the Lord of Darkness wouldn't spare him a glance.

Clicking her tongue, she smoothed her tangled gown at the waist. “Lucifer didn't send me to you. His brother, Michael, did.”

“Michael?” Solon took a step closer, his face a taut mask.

“The archangel. King Michael now, since Lucifer gave him his throne in Hell, though I think it's a temporary arrangement. But what do I know? Court politics are above my caste.”

A sound of disbelief slipped past his lips. “You expect me to believe the Archangel Michael, to whom I've dedicated my life, sits on the throne of Hell?” His voice, whisper soft, held an edge of danger.

She waved her hand through the air as if she could whisk away the peril. “It's true, whether you choose to believe it or not. But I hope you do, because Lucifer took Michael's sword, and Michael wants it back. Something about the balance of power. Yada, yada, yada.” Her feet shuffled backward, caught in a dance between wanting to touch Solon and fear of him. “King Michael requests you retrieve his sword. It lies close to where your brother perished in the wilds of Northern India, but it is guarded by spells he cannot break. He believes you might, with my help.”

“Your help?”

She shivered. “Yes. You lead an organization called Veritas, organized in Michael's name. He calls on you to honor your ancient vow.”

A sudden wave of dizziness made her grasp at the edge of the bed. The room spun. Still, she tried to straighten.

“What’s wrong?” He didn’t move, didn’t try to help, but his expression softened.

“I told you. I’m starving.” The cold lodged in her bones was a constant reminder. “He hoped you might give me your essence. He wishes you to know it will not harm you, and it will help me survive the journey. Help me to help you.”

In response, he paced the space. “You expect me to let a whore touch me? After you’ve been with thousands of men? How many diseases do you carry?”

She sank back onto the bed as her legs wobbled and bit back her vertigo. “No one has ever touched me, Solon de Sai, but you, here, today. I appear only in dreams, a figment of imagination. Michael must have sent my body above-shell to help his quest.”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the ceiling as he crossed back and forth over the rug, pondering her words. “And in Hell?”

She shook her head. “I wish to wed, and Hell has archaic purity laws for brides. I am untouched and without any disease.” She took a deep breath. “I am also not offering you my virginity.”

His gaze dropped to the vee between her legs. She felt it as she would his fingers. “You’re not?”

She shook her head. “No. I must marry or face a lifetime of torture.” She glanced up. “I can offer other parts for your enjoyment, like my hands, my lips, or... appendages human women might not, um, sport.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She had never had to speak so bluntly before.

Solon’s gaze pierced hers before once again retreating. “I don’t understand any of this.”

Nodding, she tried to smile. “I know. If it helps, succubae are a bit like energy vampires, except we don’t bite—not unless the client is into it,

and even then, it would be just the idea of biting. The client feels everything, but we succubae don't. We don't feel anything."

"Like a hologram?"

"Exactly. Alvin, one of my charges, told me I'm like virtual reality with sense-o-vision, smell-o-vision, and feel-o-vision." She pursed her lips. "I'm not a whore, Solon. I'm just performing the only job available to me, trying not to get fired and sent to the Punishing."

Rather than look at him, she stared through the open drapery. The black night edged into gray. In moments, she would have to depart. An uneasy sense of failure filled her. Tomorrow—today, already, she would almost certainly be sent to the Punishing. Even if they granted her another circle of the clock, she wouldn't be able to convince Solon of anything. Starvation would steal her voice and her will. She wouldn't be able to convince the blond warrior to orgasm for her.

His eyes snapped with sudden fury. "You're a liar as well as a whore."

Rising on trembling legs, she straightened as far as she could. "Your tongue should be pecked out by a murder of crows." She glanced again at the window. The day rose with furious speed. She looked back at him. "I must go before the sun rises. If I am able, I shall return this night for your answer to Michael's request."

She made to turn away from him, to move back through the ethers if she could. Never having visited above-shell in body form, she wasn't certain she could leave, but a sudden wave of panic made her try.

Before she could complete the rotation, Solon grabbed her. For just a moment, her heart spiked again with hope as he backed her against the glass panes.

He leaned his face close to hers. "Why the rush?"

The dawn stirred in her blood. "Because I'll be burned to ash if I'm here when the sun rises." Fear clenched in icy trails up her spine even as her body filled with heat from his closeness. Treacherous body. It swayed toward him, so she had to steady herself by latching onto his wide chest with her palms.

In response, his hand wrapped around her throat, his hips ground into hers, and his eyes glowed with resolve. “From Hell you’ve come. To dust you’ll go.”

She glanced over her shoulder again at the orange slash hugging the ground. Terror rounded through her. “Please, Solon. I-I offer a holy quest, not a satanic one. In fact, it’s the opposite of what Lucifer wants!”

“No archangel would consort with a demon.”

Vella gritted her teeth. She couldn’t hope to turn through the ether so long as he touched her. Even in dreams, she had to disengage from a charge before removing back to Hell.

Tears pricked her eyes. Had anyone anywhere ever lived so unfair an existence? All she had ever wanted was a kind of peace, a small life free of pain and suffering and someone else’s requirements ruling her minutes. From childhood to present day, her every want had been denied. At the age of eight, she had been ripped from her home and sent to the dormitories to be trained for her profession. Not that it mattered. Her father had beaten her so regularly, she had been happy to leave. And when it had become apparent she could no more gather sufficient essence than she could rule a kingdom, she had tried to go home, only to be sold by her father to the Sereth clan as a vessel. She had run back to the dormitories as if all of Hell pursued her rather than submit.

And now she was going to die. Her demon soul would go to the Punishing just as surely as she would have been sent there for failing at her career. Jax wouldn’t have to debate the marriage offer any longer.

Everything was over.

As she stared into Solon’s gray eyes, his face softened briefly before again hardening into a mask of implacability. Tears leaked from her eyes and streaked down her cheeks as light skipped over the back of her arms, bathing her skin in subtle warmth.

Too late! Closing her eyes, she waited for the fire. Her forehead dropped to Solon’s chest, and she sobbed, all her failures adding up to this one last monumental error. As her final strength ebbed from her legs, her body slumped against his.

For a moment, he supported her, chest to chest, before he moved back a half-step, leaving only his strong arms to carry her weight. “You’ve lied about this as well, little succubus. You do not burn.”

Shaking, her fingers pulsed against his chest. The sun streamed all around her, creating a dark umbra of his broader figure on the oriental rug. An expression passed across his face once more. Relief? Or did she just imagine it because it was what she wanted to see? Surely he wasn’t so blithe or cruel that he could have danced on her pyre without some regret.

Lifting her head, she scented the air. Daylight. It smelled different above-shell. Fresh. Green. Hopeful?

Solon regarded her. “Why aren’t you dust?”

Leaning her head back against the cool glass, she pondered the question. “I don’t know.” A yawn spread her jaws, but her legs no longer shook. She felt—stronger. The sun on her skin warmed through to her icy core. It lent her energy, almost like essence did. Not as perfect, of course. Not as nourishing, but still... “I presume Michael changed the normal course when he gave me physicality in this realm; all the better to see his will done.” She gazed back into his gray eyes. They were a wall of shadow behind which she could not travel. “I didn’t lie, Solon de Sai. King Michael has requested your assistance. Whatever you think of me, you need to give me an answer for him.”

Brave words, while her blood still struggled.

He released her and stepped away. The absence of his touch ached against her skin.

“I understand even less, which pisses me off.”

A smile twisted her lips. “I believe Michael enjoys annoying people as much as he enjoys his blasted synchronicity.” She took another breath of daylight. A trail of energy washed through her. “He discovered me trying to pilfer a rare blue flower from Lucifer’s garden. I intended to exchange it for a haul of essence, enough to keep me employed and fed for a couple of weeks, which I hoped would be long enough for Jax to agree to marry me and take me away from my abysmal destiny.” She shrugged. “Call it right place, right time. I don’t know why you’re on my client list. I

don't know why you were searching for Michael's blade, or why you head an organization established in his name, or even why he happened upon me in the capital garden when he was supposed to be taking his ease with his latest love on the Sea of Elicher. He says it's synchronicity, and he seems rather pleased with the result."

Solon stepped one pace closer again. "And my essence?"

She pursed her lips. "It would strengthen me." It would give her greater leeway in case Jax said no. "The sunlight seems to help, though." She held up an arm to examine the play of light along her skin before she lowered it again.

He appeared to consider her words as he stared at the rug. "Energy is energy, I suppose." For the first time, his voice did not sting.

"I don't even have to touch you." The words slipped off her tongue. "I only have to be near you when you orgasm. You could do it yourself." Hope made her heart beat fast. She took a step and stumbled.

The look he sent her disparaged the idea. He plucked her from the air and drew her against him. Her stomach flipped with anticipation. But instead of kissing her, as his long stare suggested, he released her and backed away to the doorway, where he leaned against the frame. The war within him played between his casual stance and his taut muscles.

"I'm not going to masturbate in front of you, Vella." Rotating away, he spoke over his shoulder. "I'm going to shower before breakfast. Do you eat?"

She thought about his question as he paused. "I don't know. In Hell, yes, but it's more a social thing than a necessary one. I grew up on purchased essence until I was old enough to go seek my own. But perhaps, here...."

"I'll send a maid up with some rolls and coffee. Don't feel obligated." He stepped out into the hall.

"Wait!" She crossed to him and stopped some feet away. "Does this mean we have an agreement?"

With an abrupt cut of his chin, he turned and marched away. She moved to the doorway to watch him until he was out of sight. His ass was magnificent, so hard and firm it barely moved with his graceful steps.

She could touch him. She could feel Solon's skin if he would let her.

She really needed to touch him.

C HAPTER FIVE

After a refreshing shower of her own, Vella slipped back into Solon's bedroom. Between the flow of water over her skin, the sunlight above-shell, and the delicious chocolate croissants and chicory coffee she had practically inhaled, she felt almost... full. Almost. Apparently, there were close substitutes for essence in this realm.

But would it be enough? If Solon didn't wish to help her by orgasming, if he was still too mired in his upbringing, or if he didn't find her attractive... The thought ripped through the lovely energy, hope, and well-being flooding her body. She pushed it away, but it kept bouncing back. Her perceptions were clearer now that she could stand on her feet without wobbling, and the truth was... she might have fallen the teeniest, tiniest bit for her charge. Or she had fallen a lot, like right through the earth and into an endless abyss.

Her heart began pumping double speed as she acknowledged the problem. Yes, he had tried to kill her, and yes, he hated her genus, and yes, he was a speciesist, but none of it mattered next to the other characteristics he held. He could be gracious. He could be kind. He had honor, and oh, he was devastating to her senses. When he touched her, when she touched him, it was as if the entire planet paused. But maybe it was what every woman felt with every man? How would she know?

She couldn't. The important thing was to carry on in a professional manner. She needed his essence and the bluemyrad bloom. Nothing else mattered.

But when Solon stalked back into the room, his golden hair curled at his nape, a black tee stretched over his rounded muscles to slide into the narrow waist of his jeans, her hunger rose with an undeniable vengeance. As his hips rolled, she gripped the small table and forced her legs to remain in human form. Fingertips vibrating, she longed to change shape. All her succubae friends raved about double penetration – her tail in him,

his cock in her slit. But it would require his consent—and it would require she give up her dreams of marriage.

“I see my maid found you something to wear. Good.” A small smile twisted his lips as his gaze roved over her body. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he seemed to like what he saw.

Her jeans and simple black tee matched his, but her shirt was dampened front and back by her long, dark hair. Beneath the wet fabric, her nipples budded.

Solon fixated upon the points before his gaze slipped sideways. “Did you enjoy breakfast?”

Slowly, she nodded. “It’s as if I’d never tasted food before. The chocolate croissants were delicious, but the coffee...”

“New Orleans chicory. Can’t beat it. You look more awake.” His eyes narrowed as he came to rest in front of her.

Heat traced her cheekbones. “The caffeine, or maybe the sunlight.” Or being near him. He fired up all her circuits.

“Good. Guess you won’t need my essence after all.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he burst into laughter before she could. Happiness silvered his gray eyes and made him seem younger. Softer. Her fingers ached with the urge to brush against his skin.

Shaking his head, he gestured toward the door. “You’ll need clothes. My sister left everything when she ran off, some items with the tags still attached. Follow me.” He turned on his heel and disappeared into the hallway. Nothing in his stance suggested he wanted to touch her as much as she needed to touch him.

Vella started to follow his taut buttocks out the door, but something held her back. Perched on the edge of victory, she suddenly feared tumbling onto invisible jagged rocks. All her life, she had been forced to battle for every tiny halfway decent thing, like mere survival. Solon’s sudden softness seemed... odd. Dangerous.

Others might borrow luck. It had always evaded her grasp.

Shaking off the foreboding thought, she chased after her golden warrior, passing a series of closed doors. At the end of one hallway, she caught sight of movement turning right down another. Sprinting, she took the corner and ran into her enormous, unmovable, reluctant host. She ricocheted off his back and fell onto her bottom.

For a moment, a war waged upon his face. Finally, his hand stretched forward and lifted her back onto her feet. She sensed he would have preferred to leave her on the floor like the trash he thought her.

Once more, her hope tumbled, this time shredding on those proverbial stones.

“This is my sister’s room. You’re welcome to anything you find. When Callie ran off to get married, she abandoned it all.” He gestured with his chin through a doorway.

“After your brother’s death?” she ventured.

His eyes tightened, and he nodded briefly.

“Loss makes people do crazy things, even in Hell. Above-shell, it must be so much worse. The uncertainty about the hereafter would destroy me.”

Again, ambivalence held his features immobile except for an almost imperceptible tightening. Perhaps he didn’t expect sympathy. Maybe he didn’t want it.

Touching his arm, helpless not to, she walked through into the room and gasped at the unexpected display of decadence spread before her. Ruby and velvet, dark and dangerous, the space enfolded her with tactile elegance. Even the rug beneath her bare feet stroked her flesh. Comprised of enormous black sheepskins sewn into a single grand confection, it stretched almost across the entire floor.

“Oh.” The sound escaped on a moan as she dug her toes into the soft wool. “Wow.”

Without considering, she sank to the rug and stretched out upon it. It tickled her bare arms, and she laughed and rolled across the length before changing direction and landing at his dark brown boots.

Solon's eyes flashed and narrowed. A different heat sparked within.

Twirling away, her heart pounding, she gazed at the ceiling. Surrounded by a dark mahogany frame, a midnight-blue night sky sparkled with little lights set behind stars. They glowed even with the draperies cracked to let in the daylight. Taking a moment to center her core, she stroked the sheepskin before sitting upright.

“Sorry.”

With a nod, he slid open two of the wall panels. Bright light flooded out, revealing an enormous closet. “I don't expect we'll be gone longer than a week. Think jungle and comfort, similar to what you have on now.” His hot gaze raked over her body again, but the hard planes of his face remained unyielding.

The contradictions in him were killing her. She would give a week's essence to know what he was thinking.

Jumping up, she brushed past him into a wonderland of confections. Floor-to-ceiling racks of clothing, shoes, accessories, and voluptuous lingerie begged to be stroked.

“Wow.” With tentative fingers, she reached up to pet a lace blouse.

He cleared his throat and held out his hand.

Understanding, she withdrew the paper upon which she had earlier scribbled the coordinates Michael had given her. Their fingers brushed. Hot sparkles rose from her gut to her chest, but if he was similarly beset, he showed no reaction.

She turned her attention back to the garments. A stack of carefully folded tee-shirts lined one of the cupboard spaces. A whole week with Solon?

The thought spiked her nerves. Yes, it would give her a chance to work him towards an ejaculation, but at the same time... how was she going to settle her own desires? Because even if he allowed her to bring him to orgasm, he wouldn't return the favor. Some things just weren't possible. He hated demons too much.

He moved to stand beside her, the paper containing the coordinates of the sword crumpled in his fist. A frisson of longing dappled her arms as his breath whispered against her neck. “This is where we were looking when Brett died. We were so close.” His voice shook.

Vella rotated to face him, coming face to chest. She looked up the long, hard length of him. With tentative fingers, she tried to convey her understanding without words.

“I didn’t think demons understood compassion.”

“You hold a lot of negative thoughts about demons.” Although, he wasn’t wrong in general.

Instead of disagreeing, he sighed. “Be quick. If you’re not ready in five, I’ll send you back to Hell the old-fashioned way.” He touched his brown belt. Hanging in its sheath, a long, wicked blade waited. “I have the coordinates now to find Michael’s sword on my own.”

She imagined the knife at her throat, her blood seeping along the edges. Some contrary part of her insisted he would have to hold her close while he sliced through her skin.

It might be worth it.

C HAPTER SIX

Solon shuffled the papers his secretary had sent with him to review. The words refused to make sense. The pages might as well have been a restaurant menu. Instead, his attention kept being drawn back to his little succubus and the delight she took with... everything. Her nose was pressed to the iced airplane window, and every time she exclaimed at something new, which seemed to happen every few seconds, his cock danced, and he grew less interested in work.

If he didn't know what she was, he would have ripped her clothes off by now. From the cloud formations, to the comfortable seat on his private jet, to the champagne... and the rug, earlier, the sheepskin rug upon which she had rolled... everything enchanted her, and therefore, she enchanted him.

Black hair on black pelts, silk against a scratchier texture, and damn it to Hell—his fists clenched around the pages. No. Focus. The European division of Veritas wished an outlay of funds to search for Lucifer's emerald tablets, written in his incarnation as Djehuty. A lead in China...

Vella rotated to smile at him, and his entire body hardened. She would welcome his touch on her satiny skin, those lush curves and contours. He could fall into her hidden valleys...

"Stop playing with the seat, Vella." He snapped at her, earning a frown.

A groan vibrated in his throat. Fucking delightful. Every move she made. Watching her was a cross between watching a new puppy gambol in a field of daisies and a delicious, scantily-clad ingénue suck on her lower lip. He didn't know if he wanted to scream... or scream.

She sidled from her seat and plopped down next to him at the table. Rotating her chair, she bumped her bare foot against his boot. The

tiny connection caught in his chest. The first thing she had done once the plane was in the air was to remove her shoes and socks, claiming even Hell wasn't so dastardly as to strangle her toes like his sister's boots did.

"What are you doing, Vella?"

In response, she lifted her fingers. Pausing, holding his gaze as if seeking permission, she moved her fingers to the edge of his jaw. "You're sad."

"Sad?" He wasn't sad. He was horny for a demon, which went against everything he had learned and stood for. If he were one of his men, he would court-martial himself for his thoughts.

He opened his mouth to deny her allegation, but then closed it again. Maybe he was sad. They were on their way to the place his brother had died in a pool of blood and sweat.

He missed Brett. His older brother had lead Veritas until the fatal day he had fallen to the quest. If Archangel Michael had taken an interest months ago, his sibling might still be alive, leaving him to continue on, a lowly soldier from a hereditary family eking out a small existence as a warrior. He wouldn't be responsible for all the men he was about to put in danger.

Or for the little succubus. His gaze raked her again. How was her delicate form supposed to survive the brutal journey inland?

"Maybe I am sad," he finally acknowledged as her fingers dropped. "Going back to the place my brother fell isn't easy, though I'm not sure why. Since his death, I've led three other expeditions, though not over the exact spot. Still, close enough."

"You were not armed with divine help." It was as if she read his thoughts.

He schooled his expression. "Or demon help."

She looked past his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I just want you to know..."

"That you're not a typical demon. That you've been sent by Heaven even though you were born in Hell. That you're willing to distract

me from my grief, if only I would let you.”

She stared at him again and bobbed her head. “Yes. All that.”

He smiled. It probably wasn’t an expression most women would wish to see coming at them in a dark alley. It probably looked as feral as he felt.

Forget it. He threw the papers down and rose. Unless and until he got her out of his system, he was going to be useless. And anyway, Michael, Heaven, had sent her. What was he thinking, to waste the gift? He held out his hand. “You’re too skinny. Come with me.”

For a moment, it seemed she didn’t understand. Then, a slow smile split her beautiful face. “Really?”

“There’s a bed in the back. You want my essence. I’ve got it in spades.” His cock jerked as a thousand images of how he might give it to her flipped through his head. Later, he would find a way to punish himself for the transgression. What was the old saying? Better to ask forgiveness than seek permission?

Grinning, she slipped her delicate hand into his larger, stronger one. He pulled her up, tugging her against his body, her small form lighting a trail as her breasts flattened to his ribcage. Tiny and voluptuous, it was as if she had been made for him. Lust, red-hot and furious, rushed through his veins as he stroked back a strand of her ebony hair.

Yup, it would be rude not to accept.

Herding her toward the back curtain, he tore his tee-shirt over his head, unbuckled his belt, and shucked his shoes before gently pushing her through the curtain. Heaven help the idiot who disturbed them.

When she turned, he grabbed the neckline of her shirt and ripped it to her navel.

Her cry of surprise only drove the drumbeat of his blood higher. He tugged at her belt as his brain shut down, before stripping her of her jeans. He needed to fuck her. End of story. But when she stood naked and trembling, an animalistic urge to plunge inside her made his hands shake. He tore off his jeans as he devoured the bare triangle between her legs with

his gaze. Grabbing her hips, he yanked her toward him, her sex crushing to his.

“Wait. Please.” Her hands fluttered to his chest.

“Are you going to play the blushing virgin, Vella? Well, it’s like a million men too late, right?”

She bit her succulent bottom lip. He couldn’t stand it. His mouth dove to hers, changing places as he sucked the velvety pillow between his own teeth.

When he released her, she panted. “Y-you’re going to....”

“Fuck you. I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to sit for a week without feeling my cock inside your dripping pussy.”

She flinched at the words or the idea; why, he wasn’t certain. She was a succubus. Sex was her life. But as an expression of resignation settled upon her perfect features, anger cleared some of his lust.

“Why aren’t you gloating? You’ve been begging for my essence.”

She shook her head, her eyes twisting down at the sides. Tears brightened their dark surface so they shone like sin-filled glass.

He took a step back and ran a hand through his hair. What the hell?

Trembling, she didn’t move, didn’t try to cover herself, but only waited. Waited for him to... rape her?

As his cock shriveled back to comfortable size, he held up his hands in surrender. “Explain, Vella. If you don’t want me to touch you, I won’t.” He stopped in front of her, so close she had to tilt her chin up to see him. “I thought you wanted me to orgasm.”

She nodded. She shook her head. A sob escaped the lips she was biting between her teeth. She looked lost and vulnerable, so scared it tore at his soul. Slowly, he lowered his hands to her hips once more. She flinched, but he only directed her to the bed. “Sit.”

But he had to help push her down, she proved so stiff.

“Talk to me. Explain why you’re suddenly terrified of what you were begging me for not an hour ago.” He used his softest voice, the one he used to tame colts on his grandparents’ New Jersey horse farm where he had spent most of his teenage years.

Bending his knees, he sank to the ground before her, encircling her calves with his hands. He needed to touch her. She needed to learn his touch. While he had no idea what the Punishing was, the way terror spiked across her face when she mentioned it gave him a pretty good idea she didn’t want to go there, so she would need to let him touch her. He wasn’t going to masturbate in front of her. Although...

“I th-thought y-you were going t-to....”

He spread his palms over the top of her thighs. Her eyes briefly shuttered, but when she opened them, fire laced her gaze. Okay. So, it wasn’t that she didn’t want him to touch her. He had just come on too strong.

“Whatever I said before, I don’t want to hurt you, Vella.”

“You called me a whore. You tried to kill me.”

At least her voice had grown stronger, though the reminder punched him in the gut.

“I did. I didn’t understand the nature of your work or Michael’s involvement.” He tried to find the right words to explain. “I was raised to abhor Hell and everything in it, Vella. My instinct is to kill demons. All demons. I saw your terror, knew you believed you would burn in the sunlight, and it made sense. Darkness can’t live in the light. But when you didn’t burn, when you explained the quest....”

“When you finally believed me.” Her beautiful lips pursed.

He ignored the urge to kiss her and nodded. “Yes. Because you didn’t burn. And then because, well, because you’re so fucking delightful.” Odd, how the compliment sounded like a curse, even to his own ears. He sighed. “I refuse to be the man who sends you to the Punishing, whatever it is. I’ll help you. You want my essence. I want to fuck you. I won’t hurt you. I can be gentle, though you’re driving me insane with need.” He ran

his thumb over her high cheekbone, tracing the faint blush of pink lying there.

She lifted his fingers to her lips and pressed a kiss to them. “I know. I knew you were a hero. From the first time I entered your dreams, I saw your gentleness and your strength. Before you knew what I was, you wanted to help me.”

The way she looked at him, it was as if he had hung the stars. The heat he felt in his cheeks suggested he was blushing, too.

“A hero who tried to kill you without waiting for explanation.” The reminder twisted in his gut though he still wasn’t certain he shouldn’t skewer her on his blade.

The contradiction in everything he was feeling and thinking was driving him mad.

“A hero who would save the very thing he has been raised to hate.” She sighed. “I can’t change how I was born, Solon, no matter how I never fit in with my species.” Her hands unclenched and came to rest upon his shoulders. “I know how to tempt a man. To please him. But as I told you, I have never actually touched someone or been touched in return. This.” Her hands fluttered before coming to rest again. “It’s so... intense.”

He wagged his brows. “Yes, it is.”

She squeezed. “If I wish to marry, and I do, because my only other option is to eventually be fired and sent to the Punishing, I need to remain a virgin.”

He made some disbelieving noise. The idea that Hell demanded a chaste bride seemed absurd, though this was the second time she had told him.

She smiled softly, but her lips trembled. “Hell is archaic. Females are required to survive the Ceremony of Blood and Seed, a terrifying marriage rite. If I survive the ceremony and am found impure, the Punishing will look like a vacation on the sea by comparison.” A shudder rolled through her before she drew in a long breath. “Hell, as you must know, has perfected all forms of torture.”

He did – or he suspected. He bit his bottom lip as he considered. Unbelievable how the answer tore through him like a hot sword when he might have fucked her in his imagination for the past month. “You cannot fuck me.” The sandcastle he had built upon his shifting desire of her toppled.

“But I can pleasure you in other ways if you’ll let me,” she assured him quickly. “I swear, Solon, on my very life, you will not lose your soul to me, and I will not harm you. I would never harm you. You’re my hero.”

There was that word again. His throat tightened. Leave it to him to capture a succubus who admired him, only to discover he couldn’t fuck her. He sank back further on his heels, her admiration leaving a trail of slimy guilt inside him. He tried to brush it away. “You’d marry an evil demon?”

She stood, drawing him to his feet as well out of some ingrained sense of politeness. “Demonkind are like humankind. Many are temperamental. Some are horrible.”

“But the one you’ve chosen for your husband?” Because it seemed important, suddenly, to know what her future held.

Her nose scrunched. “Few will accept a succubus as wife. Even though we only work in the mind, most require complete ignorance and innocence of their brides. But there are some in the working class who can’t afford any other kind of woman. Hell is also very... stratified.”

“And your future husband?” He repeated the question as she skated around the answer.

Her gaze shifted. She held herself very still. Finally, she said, “Jax of the Jarmond clan has expressed an interest. He’s a sweeper, but his apartment isn’t in a bad area. Not really. Bad adjacent.” She fluttered her lashes and shrugged again. “I’m certain marriage to him will prove tolerable enough if I can earn enough essence to take me through his period of deliberation. He’s not certain he wants to debase his line by infusing it with my blood, but we met once, and even though the date didn’t go very well, he did send a note to my father indicating he would

consider me as a surrogate mother for his children. He really needs the help.”

A sudden fury swept away the last of his desire. The idea that Vella should settle for some creep who wanted free nanny service was revolting. With her sweet personality and her gorgeous face and figure, she should be able to marry a prince. Everything from her soft curves to her kindness demanded better.

Jax. Fuck him.

Solon dragged Vella into his arms. He laid his chin atop her silky black hair and tried to settle his temper. Instead of flinching away, she melted closer, her hands circling to his back. Something hard in his chest eased at her touch.

Fine. He wouldn't ruin her. He would give her the currency of her realm, and later, once he had the sword, he would ask the archangel to watch out for her. Surely, Michael would be grateful enough to at least hear him out?

Solon hadn't asked for the succubus to come into his keeping, but she was now his responsibility. His charming, sweet, utterly without pretension demon needed someone to help her since it sounded as if she was alone in the world. It wasn't her fault she had been born into such evil.

Maybe he could offer his protection? He could make her his mistress, set her up with an apartment and an allowance. It was an old-fashioned notion, but it wasn't as if she could go out and get a job or legal documentation, at least, not right away.

Except, his future wife might object. As head of Veritas, he was expected to marry within the fold. One of the contracts he was currently trying to ignore rather than sign was his agreement to marry Felicity Childes, the treasurer's daughter. Since his childhood, they had been informally affianced. The cleanliness of bloodlines in most secret societies proved just as important as it apparently did in Hell.

Still, Veritas had been formed in the Archangel Michael's name, and he was the one who wanted Solon to take Vella on the quest for his sword. All the Veritas seers had directed them to the jungles of Assam in

the northeast of India, correctly, it appeared. He had spent so much time in the rainforest, he practically knew the acreage by heart.

Just as he wanted to know Vella. The need for her flesh and pooling blood beneath his hands proved too hard to ignore. They had an hour. He hadn't signed the marriage contract yet. The future was still in flux.

He planned to use their time well.

C HAPTER SEVEN

Vella landed on her back in the middle of the bed. Without making any promises, Solon's body covered hers. Bright sparks of fire flamed along her skin as he jockeyed up on one arm and traced her jawline with his fingers. Hunger enlarged his pupils, and he stared at her like she was dessert.

She wanted to be dessert.

"If you want my essence, Vella, you'll have to let me touch you. All right?" He pressed his hips into hers, angling the slightest degree. Everything in her contracted. When he lifted, the loss resonated up through her blood.

A sort of mewl escaped her lips.

"I need a more specific sort of agreement." He laughed. Tiny lights slivered across his expanded pupils.

She nodded quickly. "Anything, so long as I can remain a virgin." Or not. Who cared? What was eternity in the Punishing next to a few minutes with this golden god?

"There's a world of pleasure possible without the final act, as you likely know."

But she didn't, and she couldn't adequately explain to him how men took what they wanted while she remained unmoved. She understood the mechanics but not the thrill. Men had allowed her to pleasure them. Even as a dream image, they had never sought to pleasure her in return.

Just feeling Solon's body against hers was an unexpected rapture. His fingers traced over the side of her breast. A deep hollow opened within her, waiting to be filled.

She licked her lips. "Um..."

He smiled, a devilish twist of his lush lips. “Perfect response.” He brushed her mouth with his. “Prepare to be tortured in new ways, little succubus.”

A sudden chill dappled her arms. “Tortured? I thought...”

“With pleasure, not pain, although sometimes pain can be a pleasure. But I think you’ve had too much of it in your life to wish to experiment yet. Let’s start with the simple.”

Yet? Did he intend to be with her more than once? Hope, trigger-light, brightened through her, and she wove her hands around his shoulder as he kissed her neck. Hunger sped like a growing wave to the spot.

The mattress sank beneath his knees. “No black raven feathers, I see.” His palms shaved over her bare hip to her mound.

She could barely speak. She had to force her voice. “No. All females in Hell....”

“How tidy.” His voice rumbled with honey as he clutched her hips. Slowly, he played his palms upward before he reached over the side of the bed and snagged her black lace bra. Urging her backward until her head hit the pillows, he looped it around the decorative piece of carved wood on the headboard and fastened the ends around her elbows.

He sat back upon his heels and studied her. The hunger in his face opened a locked box inside her, a treasure chest she hadn’t even known existed. It was filled with possibility. Most people thought desire a poor man’s substitute for love, but everything she had learned said it was the foundation upon which the truest sort of love could be built, the type to burn through life into death, forever blazing across the universe and giving it existence. Life needed yearning. Desire in all its forms was sacred. So she had been taught. So she believed.

Solon wanted her—her true body. Her true self. Even though he hated demons, he had seen her fear of him and restrained his every impulse to take her, which meant he cared about what she thought, at least a little. And when the sun had failed its job, he hadn’t lifted his blade and killed her, though he could have. Maybe it wasn’t a good thing to be the

sole exception to his hatred, but she wanted it. She wanted to be special in his eyes.

She wanted him to always look at her as he stared at her now.

As the clouds passed across the plane's wings and windows like cotton ether, the engines vibrated up her spine. Solon traced her curves. Everything about him was long, ripped, and scalding. A modern-day warrior, the last of his kind, a medieval prince who spoke right to her heart and sex, he bent with infinite gentleness to trail kisses down her stomach.

With his legs, he spread hers, leaving the most vulnerable part of her open to his gaze. When he shut his eyes and inhaled, his need swirled through her in a blaze of fire. He trailed his thumbs up her thigh, stopping just short of where she wanted him to go.

Or not go. Because his lance rose strong and hard in front of him, far larger and thicker than the ones her elderly charges wielded, and it would be all too easy for him to pierce through to her core. His tight balls didn't wobble, and a mad urge to roll them through her fingers, to suck them into her mouth, had her drawing down her hands, except with her elbows compressed above her head, she couldn't move. The only way to taste him was with her gaze, from the trail of his boulder-like shoulders down his rows of abs to the golden thatch of hair and the succulent sword rising proudly from within it.

She licked her lips. He groaned, and his penis jerked in response. "No, Vella. I am the torturer here."

She met his gaze once more. "You can't..."

"I won't fuck you."

She winced at the word, and he laughed. He bent and blew a trail of air over her mound before rising back on his knees. "Tell me what you want me to do. Say nothing, and I will remain right here." His wicked smile grew broader.

Fiend. She licked her lips again. "I want you to use your hands and your mouth, all over my body. I want you to keep your promise and show me pleasure."

“Be specific.”

“I...” What could she say? She wasn’t certain of her own rhythms, not what might please her or what might turn her off. “I’m not certain, Solon. No one has ever tried to pleasure me, so I don’t know what I might like. I can’t direct you.”

A look of confusion passed over his face. “I had no idea the life of a succubus was so disappointing. I’ll just have to use my imagination. Next time, you can tell me what you liked the most.”

“Next time?” The words were barely a whisper, but it didn’t matter because he was sliding his palms over her waist and up to her breasts, covering them, squeezing her nipples between his flattened fingers so a wave of lightning shot down between her legs.

His lips followed. Taking one hardened point between his lips, he sucked her onto his tongue. Desire speared through her bloodstream. He moved from one nipple to the other, and her body torqued to meet him. As his hands smoothed the skin over her sides, he circled to her buttocks, spreading the two halves until his fingers pressed to her back entrance. Making circles to match his tongue, he sent waves of need spiraling through her.

She thrashed at the sensations as her eyes drifted shut. A mass of quivering gelatin, she egged him on with inarticulate cries.

“I meant to take my time, but fuck if I don’t want you so much, I’m about to explode.” Solon’s breath blew hot against her laved nipple, sending gooseflesh in ripples up her arms. When he looked up, his expression was hard. “I don’t want to come against the sheets. I will give you pleasure, Vella, I promise, but I’m not going to make it. I want you to take me in your mouth. Can you do that?”

She nodded, afraid he wouldn’t.

He rose onto his knees and moved closer so his member jutted above her lips. Lifting the pillows behind her, he placed the head of his penis against her lower lip. A drop of moisture dotted the eye. Her tongue snaked forth to lick it from his skin. He tasted salty and sweet. Delicious.

A moan of elation escaped her. His cock was silky smooth, tensile like steel, just as she had wished it to be. As he slid inside her mouth, in and out, a low, guttural moan escaped him. She stroked along the underside, helpless, accepting his movements as he wielded his control. A strange sense of victory filled her.

When he pressed against the back of her throat, his face screwed up against his feelings, she gagged.

“Open your throat. Don’t fight it.”

She tried, but when he pushed deeper, so deep he blocked her breathing, she began to choke. Immediately, he removed back to her lips, but when he plunged again, slowly, steadily, she was ready. As he pumped in and out, there was nothing she could offer him other than her acceptance and submission. The thrill of her obeisance shocked her, but the difference between the servitude she had encountered at every turn of her life and this moment was so different, it crawled into her soul.

This. This is what she had always craved, being taken by a man she trusted. This was what she had always wanted, though she had never known to name it.

His hands clasped on her head. A cry sprang from his lips as hot seed spurted down her throat. A wave of light shuddered through her, and for the first time since she had attained adulthood, she felt sated and full. Even when he pulled back to her lips, his essence rolled from him in a cloud of sharp light. Her pinkies twitched and elongated. Her lower body began to fuse into a tail until she pulled it back with conscious effort.

A shudder ran over his skin as he twisted to lie beside her. “Vella.” He whispered her name, shock rounding his tone.

“Solon.” She smiled, but her body writhed with a different need as she tried to turn toward him. “Thank you.”

He laughed, a grating sound, but his fingers, when they stroked her cheek, were gentle. “I should be the one thanking you.” He paused. “Did you, collect my, um...”

“Yes. It’s automatic, like breathing air.” Her leg shimmied over his, and she tried to inch nearer.

He stroked up her thigh. “But I haven’t kept my word yet, have I? Essence, but no pleasure for you.”

She began to object, but he shushed her by placing a finger across her lips. Arching over her again, he wrapped his hands into her hair before he leaned over and ground his lips to hers. Briefly, she wondered if he could taste himself on her tongue, but then she lost her thoughts as he played fire along the delicate insides of her mouth.

He pulled back and exhaled. “You are so fucking desirable. I’m already hard as stone again. Is this a succubus talent, the way you make me want you?” He sounded angry, and at the same time, resigned.

She shook her head, light again flickering in her chest and spreading through her veins as his hunger nourished her. It wasn’t the same as an orgasm, but it was something. “I just want you, Solon.”

His lips twisted into a grim smile. “This time is for you.”

C HAPTER EIGHT

He couldn't. He couldn't stop. He wanted everything from her, her complete surrender, her unwavering adoration, and he was a total ass because of it. From the moment he had awoken to find her hovering over him, he had needed her like fire needed oxygen. The desire had felt like an assault, so he had tried to destroy her and the uncomfortable anguish of his raging erection.

But that was when he had thought her just a demon, a beautiful temptation meant to rid him of his soul. All he had needed was Heaven's approval to spill between her luscious lips like a teenager with his first woman.

He was a precipitous ass, just as his trainer often accused him of being during their weaponry lessons. Instead of seducing Vella in gradual stages, he tied her up and fucked her mouth, leaving her little choice in the matter. Thankfully, she didn't seem to mind.

Because she didn't know what she was missing. The thought twisted through him. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to show her just how angry she should be with him.

The pink of her nipples tipped creamy white skin, silky flesh never touched by daylight. The rose of her lips, the length of her limbs, her delicate frame, the dark of her hair and eyes: all of it drew him in as if she had been made just for him, created from his very desires. And maybe she had been, but it no longer mattered. Nothing mattered except making her feel good.

Reaching between her tied elbows, he twisted his fingers through hers, palm to palm. Her soft touch eased something hard and brutal within his blood. Leaning into her lips, he brushed against them, soft, gentle, butterfly kisses designed to tempt, except he seemed to be tempting

himself at the same time. Her sighs matched the sounds crawling up his own throat as she tried to deepen their embrace.

“Sshh. Don’t move. Just accept. I need to worship you.” The words escaped him, and he didn’t realize how true they were until they lifted into the air. He pulled back to look into her eyes as her lashes fluttered.

She nodded. Her breath caught and held.

From her palms, his hands wrapped in her silken hair. Holding her steady, his lips sought hers once more, but this time he deepened the kiss and explored the heady cavern of her mouth. She tasted like his seed and something deep like wine, something sweet as candy. A tremble shook her delicate frame, the vibration traveling straight to his cock.

Fuck, what she did to him!

Trailing his lips down her jaw, he followed the tendon in her neck, taut as her head sank back against the headboard. He resisted the urge to bite, breathing in the scent of her. Vanilla. Night-blooming jasmine. Something woodsy and green. Heaven. Hell. Earth. She was everything.

Falling into her was the easiest thing he had ever done. Preventing his straining cock from ramming into her dark, moist hollow was the hardest.

Unlacing his fingers from her hair, he twined his hands around her throat and placed his thumbs directly over her hammering pulse. Squeezing gently, watching carefully to see if she objected or became frightened, something flipped in his chest when her lips parted. The look in her eyes was hunger. Desire, not fear. Trust.

It nearly undid him.

Still using his thumbs, he traced the bones of her shoulders and slipped down to her breasts, delighting in the texture of her skin. Silk. Satin. Utterly tempting. His lips followed the path until her taut peaks called his attention. Slipping a nipple into his mouth, he traced his tongue over the hard nub before sucking it deep. Another passionate mewl slipped from her as her body bucked, pressing into him.

He pinched her nipples, and she gasped.

“No moving.”

Biting her lips, she sank back, but not too far.

Continuing to lave both the peaks, he drew her breasts together so he could shorten the distance. The space between offered a tempting place for his cock to slide.

He wanted to slide inside her. Deep. So deep, he never came out. Fuck her future husband. The idea of his beautiful little succubus spreading her thighs for another man was enough to make him bleed.

Shaking the thought away, he left his fingers to minister to her breasts as his lips traveled down her stomach. Her hips flexed in his direction before settling. He tasted across her mound, smooth under his tongue, and stalled just before her slit. Her hips rose again as a cry fell from her lips.

“Please!” Her voice shook as much as her limbs. “Solon, I...”

As his tongue slid down her clit, he inhaled. Sweet and dark, her inarticulate cries matched her scent, surrounding him so he didn’t know where he left off and she began. She blossomed beneath his mouth, a flower opening.

He wanted her to shatter. He needed her to remember him once she had gone. He couldn’t be her first. But he could be there every time she shut her eyes.

His tongue traced the curves of her indent, gliding over her most sensitive part as she screamed. Down through her plump fullness to the gates of the passage, he licked her sweet juices before he stabbed his tongue deep into her hot, wet heat.

“So-o-l-on.” His name crashed between her gritted teeth as her body grew taut.

Slowly, he retraced a path back to her clit and ran his teeth lightly over the plumping skin. Her cry pulled his seed from his cock, not quite an orgasm, but close—so close, his body ached with the need to dive into her. Holding her hips, he deepened his caress, sucking and licking at the tender

nub until her cries grew hoarse. He varied his movements, drawing her up to a peak without allowing her to tip over. Up and rest. Up and rest.

When her breathing hitched and stalled, he pushed her from the edge into the stars. For a moment, she held against gravity, her body arched, but when she settled with a sigh, when her lashes fluttered and he met her dark gaze and lost himself in her radiance, he surrendered.

He needed her. He needed every part of her, whatever it might cost him. He had to plunge inside her, even if he had to marry her for the privilege.

Bending her knees, he moved his cock towards her passage, sliding it through the hot wet fullness, silky and right against his sensitive skin. An objection rounded her lips as her eyes widened. It was too late. Already, he was pressing into her narrow opening, just an inch, just enough to send him sweating at the perfect rightness of her body clenched around him.

Dozens of women had warmed his bed, but none of them had ever felt like this. Fated. His. Perfect in every way.

But he wasn't a betrayer. He had made a promise.

With a curse, he pulled out with a jerk, growling with denied pleasure.

He could barely push the words through his lips, the ones he pressed against the side of her breast. "I—you're still a virgin. I wish..." But he couldn't continue. He wouldn't force her into ruining her future just because he was a horny bastard.

Her hips circled under him. "I can help."

Thinking she meant to use her hands or her lips, he traced kisses down her stomach, but when something spiraled up his leg and brushed the base of his cock, his body pulsed. The same something then slithered between his legs. Warm flesh wrapped around him, holding him in place, as if Vella had contorted her legs, but... What?

A quick flash. His dreams. A tail, ultimate pleasure, but...

“Release me, Solon.” She tugged at her restraints, pulling his attention. “Please.”

He quickly undid the bindings, loosening the bra from around her elbows. Her hands feathered over his shoulders, into his hair, and she drew him to her lips for a passionate kiss. Deep, perfumed, she was a thousand desert nights, born under the stars, waiting for him.

When she broke away, she nipped his earlobe. The sharp pain centered him. “This is not all of who I am, Solon. I can give you even more pleasure, and myself as well, if you’ll let me.” She pulled back to look into his eyes. “Will you let me?”

He almost laughed at her worried expression. There was little he hadn’t tried. Whatever she wished to do, he was game. Plus—the dreams. Slowly, he nodded.

It wasn’t her heel parting the cheeks of his ass, but before he could look over his shoulder, she distracted him by sliding her fingers between their bodies to his cock. Massaging his balls in her palms, he was shocked by a sudden buzzing humming against them. Was it her pinky vibrating against the base of his cock? The other one on his balls? How was she...?

His seed, ready and waiting, began to churn with the need to erupt.

He sucked in his breath and tried to blink, but before he could, whatever was wrapped around his legs touched his anus. Slowly, it tickled inside, stretching him, piercing the hole.

His gasp didn’t cover the sound of her cries.

“Yes! Oh, yes!”

Fuck! Pain lanced through him, followed quickly by pleasure so intense, he lost his breath. The thing stroked soft and deep, slowly at first, but then it plumbed and withdrew. Plunge, and retreat. Over and over. As the rhythm increased, his whole body arched and tightened. He contracted around it, and a fierce wave of power swept through him. Vella cried out, her mound churning against his cock, except it felt different. It felt velvety and somehow slick.

Fuck, he was going to die it felt so good! If he could be inside her at the same time...

Angling his hips back into what must be her tail, pushing his cock against Vella's hipbone as her pinkies vibrated up his scrotum, he lost the ability to think. Wrapped in pleasure so intense he shook, he screamed again. He spiraled up and up, so far he couldn't see the earth. She was everywhere inside him, a part of him and he of her. She fucked him. She pleased him, but her body shredded along with his.

When she screamed her release, the thing inside him tickled his prostate. Another scream broke his lips as he exploded into a million tiny pieces. Pounding feet stopped outside the curtain. Somehow, even as he was sinking back to earth, he managed to shout. "I'm fine!" But his release kept shuddering through him. Falling beside Vella, who blinked her beautiful sloe eyes at him, he gasped for breath. "How...?"

A sudden wary expression crossed her perfect features. She swallowed. "I, um... have two forms."

Slowly, holding her gaze the entire time, he leaned onto one elbow. When he raked his eyes down her body, he discovered her legs had fused and become a purple-green, smooth-skinned tail. She flicked it forward so the tip could wave before his nose. The end tapered to about six inches of rounded flesh. Upon the head, a smooth purple half-marble poked from a sheath of skin. The thing looked like a cross between a penis and a clitoris. He could feel her pinkies still vibrating where they rested against him.

"I can change my form so I am half-snake or completely humanoid. They're both me, Solon."

Of course. His dreams had been true. "And you can use your tail to come as well?"

Slowly, she nodded. "The tip is very sensitive."

When he raised his hand to swipe the hair from her forehead, she flinched. Instantly, his hand wrapped in her hair, and he pulled her head roughly towards him. "For fuck's sake, I'm not going to hit you!"

She stroked his shoulders. "You're a warrior, and you hate demons. How can I know how you'll react to being taken like a woman."

She paused and bit her lush lips. “By a woman.”

For a moment, shame held him rigid. Forcing his body to relax, he lay down and spooned her into him. “I can’t find enough energy to be appalled. Fuck! I’ve never felt like that, Vella.” He inhaled her scent, sweet and warm. It calmed him. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the shattering experience she had just given him. Stroking her long, black, silken hair, he whispered, “I can’t wait to do that again.” He paused. “But where’s your pussy?”

Around a giant yawn, she said, “It’s a slit in my front. I can open it at will.”

As his eyes fell shut, he smiled, pulled her body hot against his, and let the last of his prejudices go. If Vella was a demon, he was down with demons. Hell, if she wanted his soul, he was ready to give it to her. His blood and veins still vibrated with his release. His little succubus had done her job too well, seducing him by making him seduce her, and all he wanted was more.

C HAPTER NINE

When Solon nuzzled into her neck, inhaling her scent and hardening against the back of her thighs, she rotated into him. Finding the arch of his muscled chest, she grazed his skin with her teeth. His hiss didn't stop her from tasting the slow metallic trickle against her tongue. Sucking greedily, she laved his skin as his body knit together the narrow scratch.

Life from its source. No wonder vampires swore by the crimson.

Solon growled and grabbed her by the neck, moving her away. He glanced down and back. "Fuck, princess. You bit me." His hand tightened, and his eyes gleamed. "You want me to punish you. Well, you're in luck, because I'm just the guy. Legs, pussy, and ass. Now."

Even as he said the words, he dragged her roughly with him to the edge of the bed. Pushing her over his lap so his cock jutted into her stomach, his hand centered over her buttocks, stroking the naked flesh.

She laughed to cover her disquiet. "Solon, I-I didn't mean...."

"Yes. You did." He smoothed his palm in rounded circles over her buttocks until heat rose to meet his caress. His thumb slipped to her nether hole and pressed. "I'm going to fuck you the way you just fucked me. Unless...?" He left the question open, his fingers stilling.

She knew what he wanted. She wanted it too, but she couldn't, not without ruining her entire future. It was so much harder than it should have been to shake her head.

Sighing, his hand began its slow circles once more. A second later, fire bloomed as a loud crack sounded over the airplane engines. Her muscles jumped against the sting, but he held her so firmly she couldn't move.

Before she could do more than exclaim, he swatted her again, and then again. Over and over, so fast she couldn't count the strokes, he spanked her until an inferno raged beneath her skin.

Her whines and pleas, her jagged movements, elicited a growl. "That's for fucking me with your tail without warning me first." Smack. "And this is for being a demon." Smack. "And this one is just because you're so fucking enchanting and delightful, I'm still half-afraid you're stealing my soul." Smack, smack, smack.

Tears leaked from her eyes, the pain nothing compared to her growing fear that she might have displeased him. But when his thumb again found her rear entrance, his touch was soft. The ache of her bruised buttocks raced to her pussy, tightening her body in readiness for him. A moan hollowed out her throat. Shifting, she tried to grasp his cock and bring it to her mouth, but he reached under her and tweaked her nipple.

The pain and pleasure bit through her reserves. "Solon! Don't stop!"

She tried to turn her head, but he held her face down. His thumb moved through her folds, over her clitoris, soaking up her juices before retreating back to her nether hole. She was so wet, he slipped through the knotted gate easily. He withdrew and used his middle finger, pressing deeper. Mimicking her tail, he dove and released as she tried to catch her breath and failed.

"Stopping isn't on the agenda, little succubus." Flipping her onto the bed, he covered her from behind and lifted her onto all fours. Grabbing her legs, he forced them wider. His hard shaft stroked through her folds before coming to rest where his fingers had just played. "This is going to hurt, Vella, and you're going to thank me."

With his hand closing around the back of her neck, he pressed his cock to her hole and pushed through. Vella choked on a scream as he tore her in two. She struggled to get away, but he swatted her again before wrapping his hand in her hair and forcing her chin up. Anchored, she couldn't move, impaled on one end and caught at the other.

"Please!" She cried the word, panting as her body tried to deal with the sudden agony. Helpless. She was entirely in Solon's control, and

the pain was so sharp, it cut like a blade of fire inside her.

He withdrew to the tip and plunged again. Over and over, he used her back hole, but as he moved, the pain gave way to something else. A fullness gathered inside her, forcing itself up, up, up, until it stood on the point of breaking. The excruciation, the stretch—all melded into near unbearable pleasure, but still she couldn't break, not even when she pushed her hips back into him as far as she was able.

As if sensing her distress, he used his free hand to play with her clitoris. Again, she spiraled up, until he released her, and she fell. Up again, and release. Over and over, he stroked within her and over her, playing her like a fine instrument, until all she could utter were unintelligible sounds. As his breath grew strangled, as he approached his own orgasm, he finally let her have hers. She splintered into a thousand strands of light, all of them twinkling down to earth.

“Fuck, Vella. Yes!” His cries followed her into a dark abyss.

She awakened from unconsciousness to the sound of a voice. When she opened her eyes, it was to see a soldier standing over them. Dressed in camouflage with dark hair and eyes matching her own, the man grinned.

“Sorry, sir. Just wanted to tell you we're landing in five.” With a crisp salute and a wink in her direction, he stepped back out of the enclosure and drew the curtain closed.

“The co-pilot. He's a dead man.” Solon's words edged between his gritted teeth. He rolled from the bed and sought his jeans. Pulling them on, he said, “We've shared plenty of women before, but Ryan has just gone too far.”

Vella reached for his hand and brought it to her lips. His expression softened. “My hero. But if you go around killing your men, anyone who remains will hate me.”

“Fine. I'll leave him alive, but I'm going to have a word. Get dressed. There's a bathroom there to wash up.” His grin turned mischievous. “You'll need it. Save me some hot water.” He nodded towards a door before he kissed her palm, the sensation like a brand.

Before he could pull away, she grasped him tighter. “I love you, Solon.” The words flew from her lips before she had even realized she meant to say them.

His fingers jerked against her own. “Vella...”

She shook her head. “No, I just... I just wanted you to know. When I came to you that first night, before you knew I was a demon, you held me and kissed me so sweetly—and even though I couldn’t feel it, I knew your kiss would be my undoing.” She smiled as tears dotted her eyes. “You were my hero. So good. So certain. Even your hatred of my kind, I understood. Part of me admired you for it. Part of me feels the same way. All I’ve known of Hell is pain and suffering at the hands of demons.” She shrugged. “You just showed me even pain can lead to bliss. And I love you for it.”

For a moment, he simply looked at her, until his eyes shuttered. Whatever he felt, she couldn’t read it on his face. He dropped her hand. “The problem with never having been touched is you don’t understand the difference between physical pleasure and love.”

“Solon...”

“I am a beast, Vella. You could do much better.” He looked all around the space, his eyes lighting nowhere. “Get dressed so we can find Michael’s damned blade. I can’t think of anything else until I succeed.”

“Now that you’re sated.”

Shame colored his cheeks. “Yes.” His shoulders rippled. “But so are you. You glow.” His eyes gentled and grew a misty gray. For a moment, he just stared at her before he withdrew back into his soldier shell. “I can’t tell you what you want to hear. But, Vella—I wouldn’t allow just any demon to fuck me in the ass with her tail. For what it’s worth.”

He began to turn away, and she stopped him. “I know why Michael wants the blade. Lucifer took it from him, afraid Michael would have too much power otherwise. But why were you looking for it?”

He smiled, but this time there was no joy in the expression, only danger. “Veritas has been hunting it because The Order has. That twisted bunch believe the blade can raise the dead, and as a secret branch of the

Thule, the people they want to raise aren't people we would like to see freed from Hell."

"I'm not sure the sword can do that. Raise the dead." She reached for her ripped tee shirt, then searched for her bags to find one she could wear.

"One must do what one can to prevent a zombie apocalypse." But he smiled as he said the words. Still bare from the waist up, he made a compelling sight, all golden rumpled glory and rippled muscles.

She pursed her lips against her answering smile. "Speciesist. Zombies deserve a chance, too."

"Not on my watch. Only one demon gets a pass." He grabbed her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her lips, but before she could deepen it, he pushed away. "Get dressed. I'll be right back."

And he was gone, taking his tenderness with him.

Falling in love had been too easy. Even his attempt at killing her no longer mattered. He had tried to escape her because of who she was, but he had accepted those parts of her in bed. It might be easier to focus just on their physical relationship without throwing feelings into the mix. Too bad it was too late.

Vella stretched, every part of her humming. She could still feel him inside her. She could still feel how it felt to be inside him. Every part of her, both human and succubus, felt nourished and full for the first time in her entire existence. No wonder people lived and died for sex.

Except, their time together would be short, and she had to remember it. After bathing his scent and excretions from her body, she dressed and met him walking back to the bedroom area. He had found a shirt somewhere, and his hair hung damp as if he had washed too.

He was so perfect. She should be grateful for having captured his attention for even a few hours. She was grateful. She also wanted more. But though his eyes were still misty, his face had hardened into implacable lines. He was all business now.

"Why did you evade me in your dreams but give in today?"

His gaze shuttered. He stepped back and turned away. "Because I bow to no demon." He rotated back to face her. "Not even you, Vella. You're here now with an archangel's blessing. Plus, you're flesh and blood. I can touch you. I can raise your hunger just like you raise mine. But in here." He pointed at his head. "When you tempted me in my dreams, it felt so one-sided, it was like rape." His lips thinned. "When I realized you weren't a construct of my imagination but something separate and apart, it felt like a violation. It still would."

The words hollowed out her stomach. A wave of uncertainty spread to block her throat.

He waved his hand, obviously reading her shame. "You didn't know." His eyes hardened again. "But now you do. If you return to your succubus ways, you'll know what you're doing to the men you visit." He gathered his papers and left her drowning in his words while he went back to speak with the pilots.

Go back to the succubus life? After what she had shared with him? After what he had just said? More than ever, she knew she had to convince Jax, or some other demon, that she would make a perfect bride. Even if her future husband used her own fists to beat her, it would be better than raping a man in his dreams.

Even if she could never see Solon again.

A cavern of pain and longing opened within her, drowning her in its icy depths. The fall from the delirious joy she had been feeling in his arms before left her unable to breathe.

C HAPTER TEN

Solon's team met them when they landed. Dawn was just breaking. A line of six jeeps rimmed the landing strip on the edge of a cleared field, dusty brown met at a harsh angle by verdant green. Noses faced outward for easy getaway, the modified trucks were weapons in themselves, loaded with armaments and tactical gear. Twelve of his best soldiers, dressed in camouflage and heavy with backpacks and weaponry, exchanged fist-bumps with each other as he descended the ramp.

Veritas's finest, hand-picked from the oldest families with a few new potentials mixed in, trained since childhood in the ways of the ancient order. They bulged with muscles and resolution. To a one, they studied Vella descending behind him. By instinct, he puffed his shoulders and used his body as a shield against their attention. Anticipated frowns marred their complexions, and half of them moved their hands to hover over their guns. They had all been taught to recognize demons, not by their ugliness, as laymen might imagine, but by their unearthly beauty.

Everything about Vella proclaimed her a denizen of Hell. The graceful way she moved, like bamboo shoots in the breeze. Her flawless skin, seemingly without pores, poured over high cheekbones and delicate construction. The way her energy reached out across the field and wrapped his men in silence. She seduced without intention, temptation built into her DNA.

"Stand down." He kept his voice level and firm as he eyed each man in turn.

Hands dropped, but frowns remained.

Erik, his second-in-command, stepped forward, fist over heart in salute. "Sir." With a quick glance, Erik examined the demon before returning his flinty stare to Solon. Keeping his voice low, he asked, "Consorting with demons? Are you mad, Solon, or aching to join Brett?"

The reminder of his brother washed shame through him. What would Brett think of his fucking a succubus? Nothing good.

He cleared his throat and raised his voice so the other men could hear. “Vella was sent to us by Archangel Michael with instructions on how to find his blade. She works on the side of Heaven. If anyone has a problem following an archangel’s directives, tell me now.” Just in case, he stepped in front of Vella, blocking her from any sudden attack. Hopefully, she had the sense to remain behind him.

No such luck. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. She waved at his line of men.

“Hi! I’m Vella. Nice to meet you.” She circled around him and held out her hand to Erik.

His second’s brows rose to his forehead. As his face screwed up in puzzled wariness, he glanced back at Solon.

“As I said, she comes on Heaven’s mission.” He grabbed Vella’s wrist, ignoring her gasp as he pulled her behind him once more. “Step back, Erik.”

When Erik obeyed, Solon could breathe again.

He could keep these men in line. He had to. “Archangel Michael has taken Lucifer’s throne in Hell.” Better that it sounded like a battle and not an agreement. These men were warriors. They would applaud and follow victory. “Since we owe allegiance to Michael, we will aid him in retrieving the sword Lucifer stole from him. To help us, he sent Hell’s most innocent. I have faith in Vella. If you don’t share my faith, tell me now. You will remain with the plane as a rear guard.”

“A succubus.” Randy Maier, one of the newer recruits, spat on the packed earth. A murmur of agreement, voiced low like a hiss of danger, circled from the others.

“That she is, but in physical form, sent to earth in her own body to help us. Do any of you think me enthralled?” Again, Solon sent his gaze around the assembled men. To a one, they looked down, but some not quickly enough. “I am not. I do the will of our archangel. I don’t think I need to remind you how nasty archangels can be, or of the devastation they

can cause if their desires are thwarted. I, for one, do not intend to risk Michael's wrath."

Randy stepped forward, his gaze challenging. A second passed, and one of the eldest men, a close friend, joined him.

"Randy and I will guard the plane," Fred said, unholstering his weapon. "If she destroys all of you in the jungle, at least we'll be able to tell the tale." He clamped his hand on Solon's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Sol. I can't trust any man not to be compromised by her." His gaze traveled the succubus from her length of inky, shiny hair to her curvaceous pink tee-shirt and jeans-clad form. She looked as deadly as a schoolgirl. "But if anything happens to any of you, I'll march into Hell to make her suck bullets."

Solon nodded. He cleared his throat. "Very well. Those who would go with us, we follow the path we took on our last visit. I sent you directions, so we all have a map. We'll try to avoid the natives this time, which we can do if we circle around their village at two clicks. Once we pass their lodgings, Vella will lead. Until then, you follow me. You know the drill."

With a deep breath, he pulled Vella beside him and dragged her through his men. It gave them a clear shot at her, but he couldn't babysit her the entire time, not when the hike to the interior would take a good six hours. He simply had to trust his men to follow his orders.

He had to trust they feared Michael's anger more than they feared Vella.

Slipping into the jungle, still pulling his little succubus in his wake, he walked the path his men had re-cleared while he had fucked her ass forty-one-thousand miles above the earth. Still, the jungle ate progress in hours.

Before letting go of her hand, he pulled her close. Her feet stumbled, but he kept her upright. "Erik will walk behind you. If I go down, you trust him with your life. You do exactly what he tells you, no questions asked."

She looked up at him with those sloe eyes capable of stealing his soul. “How can you be sure he’ll want to protect me? Isn’t he part of your religious order?”

Wincing before he could stop himself, he resolved his features. “It isn’t a religious order, per se, though we do our level best to operate on the side of good. Anyway, he’s been my closest friend since we were kids. Because I protect you, he will.” He hoped.

Turning from her strange mix of vulnerability and faith, the very combination eating at his soul and urging him to go down on his knees before her, he released her hand and pulled a long blade from his belt. Hacking at the path more for the sake of releasing his misplaced passions than out of necessity, he forged onward.

Several hours later, long after the trail had grown more difficult, he called a halt.

As the men prepared a temporary camp, he pulled an extra long-sleeved shirt from his pack. Vella’s arms were riddled with bug bites and had turned a bright shade of red under the hot Indian sun. Guilt rolled through him. Had she ever been outdoors under the sun? If he’d taken any longer to notice, she would have blistered.

Inhaling the omnipresent petrichor of the jungle, he took aloe ointment from his bag and drew her to him. From the corner of his eye, he saw his men shift their glances away. Ignoring them, he uncapped the tube and began spreading the cooling gel along his succubus’s arms, neck, and face. Tucking the empty tube back into his pack, he took an additional moment to square his equilibrium. Touching her skin as she watched him with her sloe eyes had raised all sorts of inconvenient desires he shouldn’t be feeling, but was.

Damn her. Damn him, too.

Over his shoulder, he barked orders. When he rose, he faced Vella once more and tucked her into the shirt. It reached her knees. Three more of her could have fit within it. All the while she simply looked at him, a small smile playing about her lips, a gleam in her eyes.

“Thank you, Solon.”

He nodded. “You’re wel...”

Instead of finishing, he stilled. So did his men. Used to unhealthy places, they sensed danger like prey. As they looked to him, he pointed to the back of the line and gestured to the right. The rear two soldiers slipped into the bushes. He drew his gun, and the others followed suit.

Whispering, he spoke over his shoulder to Vella. “Get on the ground, Vella. Flat.” Scanning the area, he wondered who, or what, watched them.

There. To his left just over his shoulder. A sudden rustle of leaves, and he pivoted and shot.

Whoops and hollers spread in a cacophony as men dressed in rags and war paint attacked from all sides. A thrown spear sliced through the outer edge of his right arm and landed in the dirt next to Vella. Rage, pure and lethal, rang through him. With a scream on his lips, he charged forward, using his semi-automatic pistol in a sweeping motion. When he ran out of bullets, he threw it to the ground and snatched his longer automatic rifle from his belt.

Last time, when his brother had died, they had been unprepared for the large number of assailants. This time, none of them held back. They had all lost friends. Brethren.

How long the battle raged, he didn’t know. When Erik grabbed his shoulder, he stalled.

“They were cocky after last time. I think we got them all.” He slapped Solon’s back, his grim voice belying the gesture. “Looks like you got the worst of it, except for Helmut Lang. Gut wound.”

“Send two of the men back with him to the plane. They can patch him up there.” Solon looked where Erik pointed, then scanned the area. “Where’s Vella?”

But his second didn’t answer. Instead, his face hardened.

“Where is she, Erik?”

“I don’t know.”

“Vella!” Solon shouted, rotating his head in every direction. He jogged back to the path where he had last seen her. His pack remained—and blood spattered the green leaves and vines. The bottom of his stomach fell to the dirt. Icy fear clutched up his spine. “Vella, answer me, damn it!” But she was nowhere.

The last in line, Roger Sherman, suddenly shouted. He thrust through the green behind him, weapon drawn. A quick clatter of bullets rang out as Solon and his men ran toward the sound.

Roger appeared, Vella in his arms. She smiled and waved at Solon, a contrite expression on her face.

“What the hell happened? Give her to me.” Solon grabbed his succubus from his man’s arms. Holding her close, he ground down the sobs of relief clawing at his throat. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead to hers. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” They were so close, her breath whispered across his lips.

He wanted to kiss her, but refrained.

“You can put me down, Solon. One of those others dragged me into the foliage. He held a knife to my throat, but then he...” She blushed.

“Fell infatuated?” Relief rushed through him, cooling his rage. “I’m still going to kill him.”

“Can’t. Your friend, Roger, already killed him.”

Her insouciant response grated against his skin as he noted the angry shallow cut on her stemlike neck. He’d kill the bastard again. Carefully, he set Vella on the ground. When she nodded to indicate she had her balance, he stepped back, his hands fisting impotently at his sides. “Can you continue?”

She smiled, her fingers brushing his cheek, infusing a small measure of calm in the sea of blinding rage filling him. “I can. Maybe some water first?”

Uncapping his bottle, he handed it to her. She took it with trembling fingers. Another wave of rage swept through him. This time, it

was self-directed. He had almost lost her, and it was all his fault. He should have kept her at his side, no matter what.

No. He shouldn't have brought her. He should have left her in Louisiana in the comfort of his home, Michael be damned. He could have followed her written directions and satellite video-conferenced her when necessary. But he'd been thinking with his cock. From the moment she had told him Michael had sent her, giving him permission to fuck her even though it turned out he couldn't, all he had been able to think about was sliding inside her.

After she sipped, she handed the bottle back to him. "I needed to be here, Solon, though I thank you for your concern. This wasn't your fault."

"You're mind-reading now?"

"Face-reading, anyway." Her hand spread over his chest. Light burst beneath her fingers. "We're close to the sword. I can feel the spell in my blood. I think it is my turn to lead?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. The rainforest could kill the strongest man. Even without warlike tribes, dangers abounded.

When he turned, she gasped. Her fingers trailed like spots of cool fire near the gash. "You've been hurt." She bit her lip, her eyes rounding.

"It's a scratch. But you've reminded me." He located his pack and foraged through it for the antibiotic cream.

Before he could do more than uncap it, she took it from him. "Let me." With her lips bit between her teeth, she smoothed the cream over the cut. Her touch soothed, slow and tentative.

He felt the contact in his soul. His entire being flipped, then flopped, and in the place where he had once held steady, a riot of butterflies began to dance. Turning from her was near impossible.

Perhaps an hour later, he called another short halt as the sun tipped past its zenith. Once more, they broke into their packs, devouring energy bars, dried meats, and more water. Though the endless green spoke of moisture, the thick heat leached it from bodies. He made Vella sit on a

cloth he spread for her as he hunkered beside her. She hardly seemed fatigued, however. The entire hike, she had kept up without complaint. Not a single strand of sweat wet the fabric of her clothing. Indeed, she looked as fresh as she had stepping off the plane, except for dozens of stripes of dirt.

“You okay?” he asked softly as he offered her a strand of jerky.

Taking it from his hand, her fingers brushed his. Despite the rigor of their march, his cock rose to attention. Incipient fool.

“I’m fine.” She laughed suddenly, the musical chime cracking him in half. Spreading her hands, she gazed around. “Isn’t this amazing? I never thought to see such beauty. In Hell...”

“Sshh.” He looked around to see if anyone had overheard. No need in reminding his men of her origins.

Lowering her voice, she spoke in a rush. “Where I’m from, there’s nothing this green except Lucif... the king’s garden. Water is in short supply unless one is lucky enough to live by the sea. I’ve never seen it, but I’m told the sound of the waves lapping against the shore promotes a sense of peace.” Her face took on a distant expression. “Maybe when I return, if I can marry, if all goes well, maybe I can buy a few days’ vacation. Though, I’m not certain even a whole bush of blue flowers and your supreme essence together would be enough to purchase free time.”

Every word she spoke cut him like a dagger. What was her life like that the only dream she had was of seeing the sea and marrying a demon who lived adjacent to a dangerous area?

The thought of her returning to Hell chafed like a bad pair of pants. It scraped his skin and refused to be pushed away. No. There was no way he could let her go back. She was his now. He would buy a small place on the Gulf of Mexico so she could feel the salt breeze on her skin every morning while she sipped chicory coffee with him and ate beignets and croissants. Michael had given him the duty to care for her, and he wasn’t one to shirk his responsibilities.

When she smiled up at him, his gut twisted. A strange sense of time running out filled him. It was hard to call time so they could break

their rest, knowing it took him closer to losing her.

Vella popped up, right into Billy Thompson, who took entirely too long to straighten her while he asked how much longer they expected to travel.

Billy wilted under his glare and turned his gaze back to the forest. Good.

Vella answered. “We should see a fallen log resembling a Scry demon....”

Heaven help him, she was going to get them both killed. His men were going to attack her, he was going to defend, and they both would go down as she distracted him. “Demonstration.” He interjected the ending as if what he said made any sense. “Lead the way.”

Billy sidled beside her and threw an arm around her shoulders, causing Vella to jump. “Hey, gorgeous, tell me how your source knows where the blade is buried. I’m not clear on the details.” Billy sent Solon a determined look, at odds with his easy stance.

Murder it was. Solon stepped up to him until he trod upon the younger man’s toes. “Get back in place, Thompson. In fact, I want you at the end of line. Stay wary. There are dangers here you might not anticipate.”

“Sure thing, boss. Hey, Vella, I’ll catch you later. There’s a salsa band playing at a little club I know in the bayou. When we get back, we should go.” He winked.

Solon had him by the neck against a tree before he could finish the action. “Get. Back.”

Billy didn’t argue. He just smiled as the rest of the men stared solidly at the ground.

Damn it.

Solon pushed Billy one more time before letting him go. Billy sauntered to the end of the line. Solon caught Erik’s gaze, silently communicating a warning to watch the younger man. When Erik nodded,

he sighed, but his fingers rested on the butt of his gun as they resumed their trek.

A half-hour later, Vella exclaimed. “There!” She pointed at a sheer face of rock ahead.

“Are you certain?”

She nodded, already hurrying toward the stone. “An entrance lies beneath the outcrop. See? There’s the Scry... demonstration.” She followed her words with a tinkling laugh.

His men spread out at his orders. When one of them whooped, Solon took a deep breath. Though he had believed Vella’s story, for the first time, he realized he should have doubted her.

Why hadn’t he? After all, she was a succubus, and she had gotten him to spill his essence with careless ease. She might have made up the story about Michael’s support, though, for the first time, he had evidence she hadn’t. Why hadn’t he considered she lied?

The answer writhed through him. Because he had wanted to believe her. Because he had wanted to fuck her. Because she was his. From the moment he had held her in his arms, he had known she had been made just for him. She was exactly the type he lusted for: long dark hair, sultry eyes, bouncy curves, and sweetness.

Delightful. Fuck.

As his men prepared to breach the narrow opening hidden beneath the scrub and overhang, he put the realization away. Later, he could wonder if his sanity had deserted him. Later, he could call himself a fool.

He grabbed Vella’s arm and held her back, signaling the others to advance. “I need to talk to you when this is over.”

She smiled up at him, her expression free of guile. “Of course.”

“You won’t disappear?”

She tilted her head and examined him. “I hope not. If it is in my power, I’ll stay as long as you’ll have me.”

Her words were a promise. At least, he decided to take them as such. Dropping her arm, he stepped away. “I want you to stay here. Outside. I’ll leave....” He scanned the men not yet through the opening. Billy. No fucking way. And Harold Chen. Good. “Harold. I need you to guard the flank. Protect Vella.”

Harold nodded and moved into a position in front of the cave, back turned to it. He held his AK-47 at the ready.

One down, one to go. He already knew enough about his succubus to know she might appear to take orders well, but she might also crawl in through the narrow opening after him.

“Please, Vella. Stay outside.”

She moved closer and stroked her knuckles down his stomach. His already hard cock turned to stone. “I’ll stay.”

He sighed and fell to his stomach. Slithering through the hole, he clambered to his feet. The first thing he noticed was the hush. The second was how his men kneeled, unmoving. If they were breathing, it wasn’t evident. Instead, to a man, they stared at a casket set, not in the earth as he had supposed, but in a carved niche in the rock wall at the far end of the circular cave. Unlit fat tapers rimmed the room, set upon shelves and in iron candelabras. Despite the lack of candlelight, the casket glowed, incandescence seeping from tiny cracks within the ancient wood sufficient to illuminate the entire space.

Veritas had searched out sacred objects across the globe. They had hunted magical items imbued with power so strong a body would explode if not encased in protective gear. He had held the sacred: artifacts of ancient cultures forgotten by civilization and dating back millions of years, more modern magicks, and religious paraphernalia. The treasures of ancient cults had been infiltrated, sifted, and removed to Veritas libraries and museums. Veritas’ duty to preserve the true history of the world, even its supernatural origins and interactions, required a selfless sacrifice in the name of future generations and the war for good.

This power hummed along his skin. All the small hairs on his body stood upright. The power pushed him to his knees, and an atavistic

terror held him immobile like the others. Even the reminder Michael himself had set the quest couldn't drag upright.

How long he kneeled, he didn't know. He only became aware of time when a small, delicate hand slipped into his. Her touch allowed him to turn his head.

"Vella." The word strangled in his throat.

Appearing unaffected, she rose to her feet and tried to drag him up as well. Though everything in him quelled, he stumbled to standing.

"Would you like me to fetch the casket?" She smoothed her hands down the front of his sweat-stained shirt, looking bright and chipper as if the strange weight of the object didn't hold any power over her.

Immediately, objections rose within him. "I can..."

Except, he couldn't. He couldn't move forward. Sweat dripped from his brows into his eyes as he tried to step toward the casket. He managed one. The next proved impossible.

Sighing and rolling her eyes, Vella swished toward the object, meeting no resistance. From the rock shelf, she hefted the weight, staggering under it. He would have moved to help her if he could have. Instead of bringing it to him, she crab-walked it to the door. Using her feet, she pushed it through the opening just large enough to allow it to exit the cave before following after it.

Released from the strange obeisance, the other men rose around him, looking dazed and confused. Solon took a step toward the entrance, and then another. He met no resistance. On his belly, he slithered from the cave to find Vella standing amidst a distant copse of trees. From the marks on the ground, it seemed she had dragged the chest behind her.

"Why doesn't it affect you—and why am I less affected outside?" He shouted, but some six feet away, nausea almost doubled him and stopped him in his tracks.

She smiled. "I'm a demon, Solon, and likely not subject to Lucifer's spell. I doubt he'd think any demon would work with an

archangel. Plus, I'm sure King Michael knew you'd need me for more than directions."

But maybe she was wrong, because smoke began tufting from her skin. The wisps floated on the air, gray swirls dissipating into the ether. Ice flooded his blood. "Vella. Don't argue. Get away from that thing." He kept his voice as calm as he could make it, but terror gave it a rattled quality.

She tilted her chin. "I'm fine, Solon."

"You're on fire." His voice cracked.

She looked at her skin and waved her arm around. "Huh. Weird. It doesn't hurt."

But as he approached, his terror for her overcoming the magic of the blade, at least for another step, she held up her hand and finally looked alarmed. "Don't, Solon. Don't come any closer. It will kill you."

"It's killing you, Vella. You're a demon, which means you can't touch a holy object." At her mutinous look, he continued. "Maybe the cave was enchanted to allow you to pass, but now the object itself is pushing you away. Vella. Please. By all that is holy, come to me." Struggling, like trying to walk through molasses in a dream, he managed another small step toward her.

"Solon! You're going to be killed!" Her hands twisted in front of her.

He held out his hand, though he couldn't reach far. "Please. I'll give you anything you want. Just... step away from the casket."

She opened her mouth, no doubt to argue, when a flash of thunder and lightning broke the clear blue sky. It found the ground behind the casket and spilled like a line of fire. The air itself split, and from the center stepped a tall, dark male possessed of glowing blue eyes.

"King Michael!" Vella smiled broadly and clapped her hands before remembering to bow from the waist. She did so quickly. "I'm so glad you've come, because I was just trying to work out how we would

transport your sword. Look.” She held up her arm. The smoke had turned black, and her skin blistered.

Michael drew his lips together. “Ah, yes. Good timing on my part, as usual.” He laid his palm upon Vella’s dark hair. Instantly, the smoke stopped, and her skin returned to its normal alabaster shade. Even her sunburn disappeared. “I meant to come earlier, but the difference in time zones still confuses me.” He glanced at the casket and held out his palm. The wood broke apart, and the sword, long and lethal, flew into his palm. Grasping it tight, he lifted it up toward the sky. Power, too bright to look at, flowed from the hilt down his arm. All around him, a halo of light burst into the air. It covered the succubus, hiding her from view.

“Vella!” Solon screamed her name and stumbled forward, his body pushing into the glow. Burns erupted along his skin as if he touched flame, but all he could think of was Vella, consumed by the fire. Her sweet smile, her gentle disposition, her delight in everything, gone forever.

When the glow retreated, Michael stood, glaring at him. Solon didn’t care. He wrapped Vella in his arms when she raced to him. Pain erupted everywhere as she touched his burns.

“Oh, no. Oh, Solon. Look what you’ve done. King Michael.” She turned her head over her shoulder. “Could you please heal him?”

Michael glared down at him from his enormous height. “To please you, little succubus. Of course.” He speared Solon with his blue gaze. “She’s so delightful, I’d feel churlish to refuse.”

A matter upon which Solon could wholeheartedly agree.

Michael stalked toward them and stretched forth his hand to the top of Solon’s head. A swift rush of cool water, like diving into a pool on a hot summer day, raced through his veins. When Michael removed his palm, no pain or blister remained.

Stepping back, he wrapped Vella in his arms, his instinct to protect her from the archangel, even though Michael seemed to like her. Still. Supernatural entities, even the ones who stood on the side of good, had a way of turning on humans. As gently and subtly as he could, he drew her back from the archangel a few steps more.

Michael laughed, his eyes crinkling with pleasure. “I’m not my brother, Solon de Sai. I don’t bite the hand that feeds me—or, in this case, hands me my sword at said brother’s expense. I owe both you and Vella a boon. And what I owe, I pay.”

He snapped his fingers. The world turned around them.

C HAPTER ELEVEN

When the power released him, Solon stumbled to the ground, releasing Vella as he fell. Atop a wide hill, ancient-looking paved stones stretched in a wide circle. They felt chill beneath his palms. Not a blade of greenery grew between the rocks, though the jungle threatened with heavy, dense growth on all sides.

Michael's feet appeared next to Solon's head. "Rise, Solon de Sai."

Scrambling upright, he tried to ignore the way the world continued to turn.

Michael laughed and plunked his hand upon Solon's shoulder, nearly sending him back down to the ground with its force. "You get used to it, traveling through the ethers. All right?"

No. But he nodded anyway.

"You've done me a service, Solon de Sai. With my sword, I can put down a rather worrying uprising in Hell, one that threatens someone I care for." His face clouded briefly before resolving. "Speaking of caring, walk with me." His hand moved from Solon's shoulder to the back of his neck, driving him with irresistible force towards where Vella sought her feet. "Enchanting, isn't she?"

Solon's hands fisted. The archangel must have noticed because he laughed and clamped his hand down again, this time between Solon's shoulder, hurtling him toward the earth. He had to take two steps to regain his balance.

Unaccustomed to feeling small and weak when all his life he had been taught to lead, a sudden panic filled him. How could he protect Vella against an archangel who was so much stronger and wiler?

Vella's hands knitted at her waist as she studied him, her eyes turning down at the corner with concern. But when she glanced at Michael, her shoulders eased, and she smiled. Obviously, she trusted the brute. So far, it was the only sign of stupidity she had shown. What the hell was she doing, tossing her soft, seductive smiles at her king?

He opened his mouth to snap at her when he noticed a tear in the arm of her shirt. Slipping away from Michael, he crossed to Vella and rubbed his thumb over the wound. "You're hurt."

"Just a scratch." She laid her palms flat against his chest. In response, his heart began galloping. "Really. It's nothing. It's already scabbing."

"The scratch is nothing. The liberties you took with her body are not." Michael appeared directly behind him without his having sensed movement. The archangel's hand grasped the back of his neck once more and pulled him away from Vella. He leaned in and whispered, "I've been the recipient of a succubus's unique charms. They're rather difficult to forget—or withstand, so perhaps you are not altogether to blame for blemishing one of my favorite demons. Still. You have done her a disservice."

Solon twisted out of Michael's grasp, aware even as he did so the archangel allowed it. Rage swallowed his helplessness. "But you sent her to me. She needed my essence. And you gave her a body here. I didn't..."

"Ruin her? In Hell, it's a question of degree, I'm afraid. I fear Jax of the Jarmond Clan might think her damaged goods, and truthfully, he is the best option available to her." The archangel's fist clamped around Solon's shoulder again and squeezed so tight his bones ground together. Pain snapped down his spine. "The lower the echelon of society, the more rigid the adherence to the black-letter law." He shrugged. "Though you did spare Vella's virginity. He might still marry her, though she will inevitably suffer for your caresses."

"You were watching." Solon pushed the accusation through his gritted teeth. But somehow, he couldn't feel ashamed for putting on a show. What he had shared with Vella had been beautiful and... right.

Healing, in a strange way. She had somehow lifted the weight he had carried since his brother's death.

All he felt now was fear—for her. Would she really suffer for being so giving in his bed? He shut his eyes and inhaled deeply before opening them again. No. The archangel was just trying to rile him. And succeeding.

Michael shrugged and smiled at Vella. “If Jax still wants her, her intact hymen will save her from being ripped to pieces at her Ceremony of Blood and Seed. Honestly, the rites terrify even me.” He squeezed again, a metal vise comprised of fingers.

Solon caught Vella's gaze before she returned to watching Michael. She bit her lip, her expression worried, before she straightened her spine.

“Vella wishes to leave her occupation and marry,” Michael continued in a softer, more dangerous voice. “As a demon in Hell, she is subject to the ceremony when she weds. Her husband will take her virginity before the hordes and brand her thereafter with his sigil. Unless, of course, she marries outside of Hell.” He released Solon's shoulder with a final squeeze and moved to the side. “Interesting dilemma, no?”

Vella shifted, her cheeks bright with color. Was it fear passing like a cloud before her eyes? For him? Or of her future?

A wave of ice traced his spine. “You've hit just the right note, my liege.”

“Have I? What perfect happenstance.” Michael pushed back Vella's hair from her forehead. It fell right back into place, a sheaf of silk, smelling delightfully of vanilla and night-blooming jasmine. The scent floated enticingly across the small distance. “Should I take Vella back to Hell now?”

It was the question he had been asking himself since the plane. No, even before the plane. What would he give to save Vella from the best fate available in Hell, marriage to a fist-happy cretin? On the one hand, he was supposed to marry Felicity. Hell, she probably already had her dress picked out. Last time he had seen her, in New York, she had taken him on a

tour of the best jewelers to look at engagement rings. She hadn't even tried to pretend it was for anything else when she handed him the list of her top three choices. Afterward, after they had sat at an expensive restaurant making small talk, she had slipped into a red silky nightgown. He had managed to fuck her—but only just. Her demands hadn't been sexy—they had been disappointed complaints. Because maybe she wanted something different, too. Maybe he wasn't the only one settling for duty.

Didn't Felicity deserve better than a contract husband who had to think of the pretty waitress down at Bub's Diner in order to get it up? And didn't he?

And Vella. When he looked at her, everything in him rose to the surface as if she generated too much light inside him, and it had no place to go but to burst out of his skin. Passion. Emotion. Need. Plump, pretty waitresses could never raise him one iota further. Vella was the dream to whom he would compare every other woman for the rest of his life.

Which meant, even if he married Felicity as he was meant to, Vella would still be with him as a wish and a regret he hadn't held on tighter.

Fuck, what a choice!

Maybe his thoughts showed on his face because she blushed from neck to forehead. Still, she stood with lifted chin, calm to the depths of her sloe eyes, accepting of her fate. Her life had been filled with toe-curling horror, and she had fought for a chance to change her destiny. She didn't expect him to offer marriage and save her from Hell. She didn't expect anything at all. Yet, she still offered him a small smile that seemed to say she would forgive him for sending her away.

Damn her, too, for being so delightful, even now.

He waited for hate, or at least dread, to fill him. But instead, a bright rush of bubbles seeped from his gut up to his head. He might be marrying a woman who could turn into a snake and fuck him like he was a girl. The shackles to a demon might kill him—but he couldn't let her go.

"I'll marry her. She will stay with me."

Michael slapped him on the back a little less roughly, smiling broadly. “Wonderful. Unfortunately, my very nature requires an application of free will. You’d best ask the young lady.”

Vella’s eyes had rounded to her forehead with his pronouncement. She stood very still.

Gently, he took her hands in his. Her pinkies vibrated against his fingers, and her body seemed ready to transform into a tail. “Vella. Will you...?”

“Why?” She interrupted his question. “Because King Michael is guilting you into it?”

“Does it matter?” He released one of her hands to run his through his hair.

She looked at him, high color in her cheeks. “I think it does,” she said in a quiet voice.

His hands slipped up her arms, and he dragged her closer to him. “I- I can’t tell you what you want to hear, Vella. What any bride has a right to demand. I can tell you I won’t let you marry some demon, or continue working a job you hate. That I hate.”

She stared at him, searching his expression, until she tugged free and retreated a step. “You feel a duty to protect me because Michael sent me to you. Because I helped you. And because—what happened in your bed was miraculous.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Relief washed through him.

Michael clicked his tongue. “You’re an idiot, de Sai.”

Vella nodded, her lips pursing. “He’s dense as a post, Your Majesty.”

He glanced between them. “I don’t understand.”

For the first time since he had met her, anger showed in her eyes. “You don’t understand that I don’t wish to be a charity project for the rest of my life—even assuming I can stay above-shell?” She looked at Michael.

“If you wish it, I can make it so.”

She looked back at Solon. “I have worked hard for every small measure I have received. I am not ready to accept charity.” She pivoted toward Michael. “I’m ready to go, Your Majesty.”

What? He grabbed Vella’s arms again and brought her against him. She barely stood chest-high, and she was making him crazy. “You are going to marry me, Vella. Stop trying to....”

Her palms flattened against him. Despite the situation, fire raced through his skin at the contact. “Trying to what?”

“Kill me. If you leave, all I’ll be able to do is think of you with some ham-fisted demon when you should be with me. Even if it is too soon. You have to marry me, because... because...” He shook his head. “You’re looking for an explanation I don’t have, Vella.”

Michael magicked a throne and sank down upon it. “I think you’re going to have to try to find one, son. You can’t win a woman by ignoring your emotions.”

Vella nodded, her fingers tapping some nameless tune over his heart.

“If you’re hesitating because I was too rough...”

“You weren’t.”

“Because I can be gentle. I won’t ever force you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with. You have to know that. I thought, since you took my ass, it would be okay...”

“I know.” A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. It held his heart in its glistening drop.

He wiped it away with his thumb. She was so tiny, so perfect in form and face and spirit, she completely undid him. She made him feel like a ravaging lion lying down beside a lamb, offering his stomach for her caress.

Maybe it was what she wanted to hear. How she undid him.

When she pulled away, he grabbed for her hands, refusing to let them go. “No. You’re staying with me. You can’t leave me, Vella. Not when I’m feeling like this.”

“Like what?” Her small voice lay filled with tears.

“Like my heart will crack in a thousand pieces if you go.” He glanced toward the sky, trying to piece together what he wanted to say. It had to be the truth; only he wasn’t certain he could ferret it out among all the strands of rioting emotions jumbled up inside him. But he had to try. “I know it’s too soon. If you were a human woman, we’d date for a few months, maybe years, before I asked you to marry me. But you’re not, and if you go, there’s no possible way for me to find you again. I can’t go to Hell.” But his voice ended on a question, and he glanced at the archangel.

Michael shook his head. “No. Not until you’re dead, and I’d prefer my champion end up elsewhere.”

Solon looked back at Vella. “Please.”

She squeezed his hands. “But why. Why do you care?”

“I don’t know why. I just do. I’ve wanted you since the first time you visited my dreams, and not just because I look at you and I’m hard as rock, or because I want to fuck you like we’ll die in the next ten minutes, and I want you to be the last thing I feel against my skin and taste against my tongue, but because....”

She didn’t seem convinced. Michael sighed, confirming his impression.

He inhaled as he fought for the words. “I want you to be mine because you’re sweet, and kind, and because you possess an amazing capacity for joy and hope unlike anyone I’ve ever met. But mostly, I need you just because. No other reason. You were made for me, Vella. I feel your rightness, here.” He covered his heart. “I’ve been with dozens of women. I’ve never felt at all like this.” He paused as he considered. It wasn’t love. It couldn’t be—but it was still necessary. “I think I need to marry you to save myself. I need you to keep breathing, Vella. I’ll take you however I can get you, even if it means marriage.”

For a moment, she just continued to stare at him, until she suddenly broke into a wide smile. She leaned forward and whispered. “I think you mean to say you love me.”

He started to shake his head, unwilling to lead her astray, but Michael cleared his throat roughly again, so he stopped and considered. Was it love?

“If love means I feel joy in your presence, despair at the thought of your absence, and a willingness to spend the rest of my life with you, then... I guess I love you.” Suddenly, he laughed, the wave of happiness inside him too big to contain. “I love you!”

She beamed. “I love you too, Solon. I have since the moment I first came to your dreams and you treated me with such care, before you knew what I was.” Her face crinkled.

“I was a fool.”

She nodded. “Yes. But I’ll always be a demon, Solon. Can you truly marry a demon when you hate demons?”

The question no longer presented the least hurdle. “Gladly. Will you marry me, Vella?”

He waited with hammering heart, but this time, she nodded. “Yes.”

Michael waved his throne away. “It’s been my experience that love feels like a vitamin deficiency when things aren’t going well, but it’s all fire, hunger, and an improbable feeling of peace when one’s beloved is close.”

Solon ripped his gaze back to the archangel. “Vella will be released from her work? All ties to Hell severed?”

The archangel inclined his chin. “And she will have no more need for essence. This world can sustain her. You have my word. I release her from all commitments, save for those she makes to you. And to me. You will be mine too, won’t you, Vella?” Michael eyed her steadily.

Solon must have made a sound of protest, or perhaps it was the way he threw his body between Vella and the archangel.

Michael clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes like a snarky teenager. “As my champion, human. Not in my bed. My Eliza would skin me alive.”

Only belatedly did Solon realize his hand hovered over his gun.

Michael glanced at his hand before raising his bright blue gaze to Solon’s. A mad, powerful light began seeping from his skin. “You try my patience, young man, but given the exigencies of love, I will forgive you this one time. If you ever threaten me again, I shall grind you into dust so fine, not a single speck will remain to grace your urn. Understood?”

He did. His hand dropped.

Michael subsided. “Very well. Do you, Solon de Sai, take Vella of the Clan Eruni as your wife, to cling unto her for as long as you both shall live?” He rotated his finger.

Solon turned and grabbed Vella’s hands again. His eyes pricked. “I do. Forever.” He looked deep into her beautiful eyes, so wide and dark they swallowed him to his very soul and wrapped him in profound peace.

“And Vella of the Clan Eruni, do you take Solon de Sai as your husband, to cling to him for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Though soft, her voice was certain. She beamed so bright it almost hurt to look at her.

“Then you may seal your vows with a kiss. What Heaven has joined, let no entity tear apart.” He lifted his hand as if in blessing and paused. “Of course, the inequities in your positions won’t do at all. Solon, you have been my warrior and taken my quest, and in the process tweaked my brother’s nose. You have earned the curse of immortality. It will extend your vows.” He smirked. “But someone has to lead my armies here on earth, especially in these days of war and deceit.”

“Immortal? Me?” He could barely tear his gaze away from his new bride to consider the archangel’s words.

“Unhampered by disease and age and impervious to all weapons formed above earth, yes. Not the total package, but close enough. Do you accept?”

He looked at Vella. Slowly, she nodded, so he agreed. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Michael clasped his shoulder once more. “I shall call upon you soon. The world is troubled. I have need of a champion.” With a swish, he dropped his hand.

The earth spun again. Solon’s bedroom resolved around them. He glanced at the bed where Vella had first come to him. A small smile twisted his lips.

It was past time he performed his husbandly duties.

C HAPTER TWELVE

Solon's gaze lit strands of fire as it slipped down her body. The inferno settled between her legs as his study stalled there.

Suddenly nervous, she skittered away, pretending to look around the bedroom. Would it hurt, the taking of her virginity? And would she please him? He was so big, so commanding, and he expected her to know all about passion, having spent the better part of her life arousing it in men. But she still didn't, not really, even after their beautiful hours together.

What if he didn't fit? What if her body didn't work right? Edwin, one of her charges, used to complain about his wife's bony sheath cutting off his circulation. As anyone with eyes could tell, she was pretty skinny. What if Solon found her bony? Then again, he had taken her narrower passage already. Surely, it would be all right...

"We should shower first." His gaze lifted back to her eyes.

Cool relief rushed over her at the reprieve, but as she made to walk past him toward the bathroom, he caught her and spun her against his muscled length. In the next instant, his lips tempted hers to open.

"Oh." She lost the word as his tongue cleaved her defenses.

After endless moments during which her world righted, he drew back and swiped her hair back from her face. "Oh, indeed. Come on. Let's get rid of the jungle sweat."

He escorted her to the bathroom, where he set about stripping off their clothes, stopping when he reached her final layer. He threw them all into a pile with the careless ease of someone who had servants to pick up after him. When he stood tall and naked, her gaze latched upon his penis. She had remembered it correctly. Tall, strong, and proud, it stood at attention, just like its owner.

With a smirk, he leaned toward her ear, his breath caressing the sensitive whorls. “If it doesn’t fit at first, we’ll just have to practice until it does.”

Another wave of heat flushed over her body as she looked at him. It was a long, hard road between his head and his feet. Her fingers itched to touch him. Everywhere, muscles bulged. He was built like a medieval warrior, all V-shaped and determined. But his eyes—the gray had almost disappeared behind pupils blown wide with hunger.

For her.

He stepped toward her, and her knees buckled. She caught the edge of the sink with trembling fingers.

“Let me help you.” His words shivered across her flesh, candy-coated steel and volition.

And she, Heaven help her, wanted nothing more than to give in.

“You are so beautiful. So perfect.”

Goosebumps pocked her arms as he slid her loosened bra straps over her skin. This time, he didn’t stop the garment’s descent at her elbows, but let it fall as he tucked his thumbs into her lace underpants. Slowly, he drew them down her hips, stroking her all the while. When he knelt, he plucked them from her feet and threw them after the other garments, but he didn’t rise except to his knees. Pulling her closer, his breath feathered her mound. She gasped and closed her eyes, but when his lips found her sensitive bud and suckled, her bones turned to jelly. Her ears filled with the sound of his drawn breaths and moans, as if he had raced up a mountain and down another. With infinite slowness, he tasted her, his tongue fomenting a rebellion within her and a desire to fly.

Mewling, she clutched his shoulders. When he winced, she released her grasp. “Sorry.”

“Michael.” He spoke against her bud, the vibration its own kind of torture. “He’s not a gentle archangel. Spread your legs wider. And, Vella?”

“H-husband?”

He pulled back to stare up the length of her. “No snake form until after I’ve had my way with you.” He waggled his brows like an arch-villain, eliciting a small laugh from her.

It didn’t cover the emptiness of his cooling trace upon her skin, but a sudden whiff of her own body assaulted her nostrils, reminding her she should bathe first, lest he think she always smelled like a ripe old shoe and regret his vows.

Pulling at his hair, she released him only when he sat back on his heels.

“What are you doing, Vella?”

“Shower, you said.” She gulped, and her gaze sought the walls, the floor, anything but him.

“Ooh. You’re feisty now we’re married, aren’t you?” But his eyes glowed as his fingers flexed upon her hips before angling them up between the two halves of her buttocks. His touch melted her once more. “You smell delicious, all warm and sweet. And you taste like sugar and bread—I could eat you forever.”

A tiny sound erupted from between her lips as fire flamed along her cheeks.

He laughed. “There’s no need to be embarrassed. I’m planning on tasting you showered and unshowered. I only suggested we bathe to save you from my ripeness, but that doesn’t mean I can’t pleasure you first. So, are you certain you want me to stop?”

She shook her head and juttred her pelvis towards his lips. “No. It was a moment of insanity.”

Laughing, he slipped his tongue through her folds like a blade through butter. With an inarticulate cry, she clasped his shoulders once more, but he drew away and stood. Turning the taps on full blast, he adjusted the rain-flow feature. Jets pumped water from all angles through apertures in the dark granite. The shower was like him, all hard edges and desire.

Trawling her under the center flow, his hands slipped over her skin before wrapping in her hair. “I hope you enjoyed saying no to me, wife, because the next time you attempt control, I’ll make certain you can’t sit for a week without thinking of me.” He slapped her rear, the sharp, staccato sound echoing off the surfaces. “You are mine, Vella, when I say, where I say, and how I say. Understood?”

Hot shivers raced up and down her spine. “I am yours,” she agreed, liquifying against him.

“Good.” The word whispered against her skin. He ran a natural sea sponge under the flow and added a dollop of liquid soap. His scent surrounded her, verdant and spicy, as he lathered her neck, breasts, and belly.

Her nipples, already hardened to sharp points, wept for more, but he rotated her around and soaped her back, arms, and legs before shampooing her hair. Every touch incited her senses, but when he tucked the sponge between her cheeks, her body caverned and jolted.

She pushed back into him, against his straining penis. A quick gasp, an indrawn breath, betrayed his own need as he jerked toward her.

Fire raced through her veins, and her skin suffered from need.

“Open.” He spun her again so he could trace between her legs.

The soft slide nearly undid her. Wrapping her hands around his neck, she lifted her leg over his hip, straining for contact between their sexes, but with the difference in their heights, she only managed to rub against his hard-muscled thigh.

Immediately, he twisted her and smacked her buttocks. The fiery arch joined the fierce hunger and burned through her.

He retreated and grabbed the soap. With quick movements, he washed himself as she looked on, panting. Waiting.

“Go. Dry off and wait for me in bed.”

Deciding to follow his dictates, she exited the shower and grabbed one of the big fluffy black towels folded in the open caddy beneath the sinks. As she dried her hair and body, he lathered himself again, sluicing

away all hint of jungle sweat. The play of his muscles elongated and retracted, holding her frozen, but when he turned the taps, she scurried into the other room, leaving the towel over the rest of the mess of their clothing. The disarray could await the morning.

Jumping onto the tall bed, she snuggled beneath the covers. No sooner had she spread them to her chin than Solon arrived. He stood in the doorway, all intent and promise, before he stalked the room, naked and splendid. As his strong limbs bunched and extended, his eyes burned with fire. When he reached the bed, he whipped the covers off so she lay naked.

He took his time looking, staring as if he'd never seen her before. Climbing onto the surface, the mattress depressing with his weight, he crossed a leg over her hips.

"Hands." He held out his own, waiting for her to comply.

When she stretched them to him, trembling, he wrapped a red silk scarf around her wrists and anchored her to the headboard. She hadn't even noticed he carried the fabric. Tugging on the restraints, she found them loose. She could slip out of the noose if she wanted to.

"You like tying me up."

"I do," he acknowledged. "The thought of you open to me, unable to resist while I make you come, over and over again... it's everything."

Any hidden or resistant part of her deliquesced under his gaze.

He watched her with a careful expression, as if he knew how she melted, then ran his palms over her shoulder blades, down to her breasts. Squeezing the mounds together, he leaned to take one nipple after the other into his mouth, tonguing the hard points to steeples of need so great the pleasure coalesced into pain. Electricity crackled beneath her skin everywhere his fingers touched as he dropped her breasts and began roving over her curves.

She tugged at her hands, an urgent need to touch him in return sharpening through her. A cry rose in her throat and emerged as a long, low moan. He shimmied down her body and licked his way past her navel to the beating pulse between her legs. Everything in her stilled when he

paused at the cleft, but instead of whispering over her clit, he rimmed the edges of her nether-lips, lifting her hips for better access.

With her legs hovering over his broad shoulders, she couldn't escape his teasing tongue and fingers. Over and around, he slipped and glided, never coming close to the center of her aching need. A mad dash of lust escaped her, the moan reforming into a sob.

"Please, Solon." She begged him, twitching her hips as best she could to bring his tongue in line.

His breath stirred against her tender flesh. "I love it when you beg."

As he latched upon the tiny nub, fireworks exploded through her brain. They raced down to the spot he laved as a delicious trill quivered up her spine. Heat pooled and broke. His touch varied, keeping her perched upon the penultimate peak without letting her break. She tugged at her restraint and used it to arch into his mouth, pleading sounds falling from her lips into his deaf ears.

When his teeth grazed her button, she arched into the air.

Instead of allowing her to climax, he slipped her legs from his shoulders down to twine around his waist. His cock, tumescent and ready, slid through her folds to her entrance.

A sudden apprehension dappled her arms with goosebumps.

He must have noted her expression, or at least the way she stiffened. "No fear, Vella. The pain will be a second against a lifetime of pleasure."

She nodded, biting her bottom lip.

He leaned to kiss her. Brushing her lips, he waited until she pulled into him before deepening the kiss. As his tongue twisted with hers, dragging her soul through her mouth, his cock found her entrance and stretched her wide. She moaned again, screaming into his mouth as he pressed deeper. Slowly, he widened the path, deeper and deeper, inch by inch, until he paused. He let her get used to his size, to the way he filled

her passage, before he plunged in one final stroke, so deep, he could go no further.

The tearing reverberated through her, more vibration than actual pain, but the stretching—the stretching made her sob. He took all of her, everything she was, and filled her to bursting.

He lifted his lips and traced her cheekbone with his thumb. “Sshh. Relax. Your body was made for this. For me.” With a small circle of his hips, he moved. “Mine. You are mine and only mine, now.”

On the heels of uncertainty, joy speared through her.

He moved again, and a shot of longing sped up her spine. Her nipples tightened again. Instead of trying to escape, she moved her own hips, sending lightning coursing through her blood. Maybe through his too, because he growled.

He lifted out to the entrance and plunged again, slowly, so slowly she thought he might be trying to drive her mad. Over and over, he used his length to entice. Up and down. Circle. When sweat dotted his brow, when her moans became a steady exhalation, he ran his thumb through her juices and used the moisture to circle her button. Waves of profound aching need built and built until she reached her peak once more.

When she clutched the scarf holding her anchored and used it to arch back up to the ceiling, he began to move faster, so fast, the heat spiraled through her entire body and ignited into an inferno. Up, up, up, she rose, past the point her body could contain her spirit, and in a moment of absolute stillness, she broke. Speeding to the stars, she touched their sharp beauty before falling back to earth to hear him scream his release. As his cock jerked and his seed filled her, she clenched around him, trying to hold him inside.

She only became aware he had loosened the tie around her wrists when his shoulders rippled beneath her fingers.

“Wife,” he growled, his lips pressing to the side of her breast. He looked up and studied her. “How do you feel?”

With him still inside her, she wiggled her hips and giggled. “Like I finally understand how seed controls the universe.” A giant yawn

interrupted her smile, but the way his eyes tightened had her lifting her fingers to caress his jawline. “Wonderful. Magical. Complete.”

Laughing suddenly, he leaned to kiss her nipple, starting the electric zing once more. Instead of further enticement, he withdrew from her body and dragged her into him, spooning her in his protective arms. “We’ll sleep. It’s been a busy day.”

She nodded, but the dark was already dragging her down, warm contentment spreading through her. She was married, and not to some inept demon who would beat her for his own pleasure, but to the most gorgeous, kind, strong, generous human she had ever known. Her desire for Solon had always exceeded her job, and his refusal had cut her deeper because of it. Now, through what many might call divine intervention, she was his, and he was hers. It almost seemed fated.

As his breathing deepened, she allowed the dreamworld to claim her, even though her most urgent dreams had already come true.

C HAPTER THIRTEEN

Solon stared down at his new bride. They had made love three times, even though he knew she would be sore, and when his hunger still raged as if he couldn't get enough of her—because he couldn't—she had slipped into her snake form and taken him in the deviant fashion he loved.

He could still feel her intrusion. The ache was delicious. If he wasn't careful, she would spoil him with her vibrating pinkies pressed to the base of his cock while she took his ass with her tail. His orgasms had shaken him to his soul.

Ripping himself away required all his strength, but when a tinkling bell chimed upon the air, he knew Michael had need of him. Taking time to pull on sweatpants, he padded to the library, following the sound. There Solon found the archangel with his feet up on the desk, one of his father's old cigars lit between his lips. Piercing blue eyes stared at him over a swirl of smoke.

He saluted, fist over heart, and bowed his head. "Your Majesty."

"Pleasant night?" Michael smiled.

Solon considered how he might answer. "Soul-shattering." Holding Vella in his arms had felt like coming home, as if he was finally where he had been meant to be all along.

Michael sighed. "Then I apologize for wresting you from the little succubus's arms so quickly, but a demon has escaped and is wreaking havoc through New Orleans as we speak. This one managed to escape in his own body, which is... unnerving. Gather your strongest and best men. I'll have transport waiting on the airfield." He named the location, one Solon often used on Veritas missions. "You should be gone no more than a week, but I must insist you leave immediately."

A week? Immediately?

Solon nodded. "I'll dress and say my goodbyes."

Michael shook his head. "No time, I'm afraid. But I've taken the liberty of leaving a note for your new bride." He stood and waved his hand. The house dissolved, and Solon found himself standing, fully dressed, at his first lieutenant's house. Michael stood beside him.

"Your flight leaves in an hour." He pulled a piece of rolled parchment from his pocket and handed it to him. "Here's the description of the being you'll need to remove. This," he added, drawing a gleaming dagger from the ethers, "is the way to kill him so he does not return to Hell to annoy me." He plunked his hand upon Solon's shoulder, hammering him into the concrete as seemed to be his wont. "My thanks."

Before Solon could reply, the archangel disappeared.

Sighing, he turned and punched the bell. Luckily, his men were well-trained and devoted. Michael's intervention in the jungle would only spur their loyalty. They would drop anything to hunt and kill a demon.

When Vella's eyes fluttered open, it was to empty sheets. A heavy piece of pressboard paper, stark white, stood upon the pillow still imprinted with the weight of Solon's head. Squinting at the elegant writing, she noted her sovereign's signature along with his explanation for having removed her new husband from her wedding bed. An arrow told her to flip the card.

On the back, by way of compensation and wedding gift, he offered a full week at a Fiji resort once Solon returned.

She lay back down and reached to pet the cooled sheets where her husband should have lain, a strange feeling of emptiness caverning within her chest and belly. Fear she had known before. How could she not, having grown up in Hell? Yet, this feeling was different. Whenever she had confronted danger in the past, it had only been her own hide at risk. Never had she felt so helpless to ensure someone else's safety.

Shuddering, she shut her eyes and basked in the light streaming through the window. The strong sun on the outer shell never failed to fill her with hope and energy. It must be why humans could plug through their limited lives with such careless abandon. Where such beauty existed, such warmth, so too went possibility.

As the day progressed, she explored the enormous mansion. Room stretched upon room, and she lost herself three times. So many servants ranged the halls, though, that it was easy to right her path. Still, if her husband was to be often gone, she would have to find something to do with her time.

When her quest stopped her at the library, she slipped into Solon's seat. The dark green leather blotter with its gilt trim reminded her of him: elegant with a sense of continuity born like armor and strength. Taking up pen and paper, she began scribbling their story. Hours passed. One of the servants brought her some dinner, and she nibbled as she considered how she had come to be married to a man she had desired long before she was given form above-shell.

Fated. Any way she looked at it, she had been fated to marry Solon. Her failures. The search for the blue flower as a means of survival. Lucifer's garden, just so Michael could find her. And Solon—he had evaded her every temptation until she could lie in his arms like a real woman.

The rest of the week passed faster than she anticipated as she wrote and wrote. When she became aware of someone watching her, she lifted her head. There, lounging in the doorway, his posture erecting angles as he tried to lean, every inch a soldier and leader, her husband smiled.

She toppled the chair as she ran to him. He lifted her into his arms and hugged her tight, his lips crushing to hers in a hungry embrace. The nagging sense of worry fled, and lightness filled her. In the next moments, he had her upon the rug, the robe she wore lifted as he plunged within. It didn't matter. She was ready, her body aching to be filled by him. With tongue and fingers, he lifted her to the peak, and when she shattered, he cried his release.

Afterwards, he stroked her hair from her forehead, his eyes filled with emotion. “I missed you like a phantom limb, Vella. I don’t know how it happened, but you are in me now. Part of me.” He paused. “I love you.”

Which was perfect, because she loved him too.

The End

OTHER BOOKS IN THIS MONSTER BRIDES SERIES

Want to discover more beastly brides and monstrous grooms? Keep reading the Monster Brides Romance Series!

Monster Brides Series Page

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C7TB9X1V>

Haunted Hearts: A Monster Brides Romance

S.C. Principale

<https://books2read.com/b/hauntedheartsmb>

Ripples For Skies: A Monster Brides Romance

Teshelle Combs

<https://books2read.com/ripplesforskiesmb>

Betrothed to the Yeti: A Monster Brides Romance

Marilyn Barr

<https://storyoriginapp.com/universalbooklinks/79902a18-3c46-11ee-bd88-077aa9a4c7cf>

As the Tide Turns: A Monster Brides Romance

Grace Mirchandani

<https://a.co/d/6jxqCqd>

The Vishap's Bride: A Monster Brides Romance

Roslyn St. Clair

<https://books2read.com/u/bxBYPq>
Claiming the Fae Crown: A Monster Brides Romance
Lilliana Rose
books2read.com/u/3GpZ9L

A Wolf's Bargain
Rachel Abernathy
<https://books2read.com/u/318eVn>

Venom Kissed
Sydney Winward
<https://books2read.com/u/mlpMWZ>

To Marry A Succubus: A Monster Brides Romance
Roslyn St. Clair
<https://books2read.com/u/bQAqBZ>

Fated to the Tarasque
Roslyn St. Clair
<https://books2read.com/u/b6G1k0>

Tide to the Selkie: A Monster Brides Romance
Serafina Jax
<https://books2read.com/TidetothSelkie>

Marrying My MothLady
Marilyn Barr
<https://storyoriginapp.com/universalbooklinks/1c2f8f2a-3c47-11ee-8be6-974b06a336cc>

Phoenix's Eternal Flame
Sofia Aves
<https://books2read.com/phoenixseternalflame>

Kraken's Vow
Sofia Aves

<https://books2read.com/krakensvow>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROSLYN ST. CLAIR

Roslyn St. Clair lives a life of uninspired normalcy waiting for true magick to happen, which is why she has always chosen a second life in imagination. The author of *Dark Romance* and *Monster Romance*, she spends her days researching archangels, the devil, demons, angels, leonids, reapers, and other supernatural, preternatural, and mythological creatures she would love to find somewhere outside of her dreams. Her motto in life is simple, and it fuels her endless search into the Otherworld: if anyone can imagine it, it must exist somewhere.

Follow Roslyn at:

Website: <https://roslynstclair.wixsite.com/my-site> (and sign up for her free newsletter and receive a free copy of “Softened,” the prequel to “Marked – Fated Archangels: Book One, Lucifer’s Temptation” in which eighty-four-year-old Verdetta Maille summons the devil for sex. Matters don’t necessarily go as planned, but she softens him for love and steers him in the direction of the woman he is fated to marry... not all loves have to last forever. Some are just fun to read about.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/people/Roslyn-St-Clair/pfbid02ZyKMAafSQ8cSuLgqgDBjKMjFXm6Qkfz3i8f51A26tHA21s673B4FM5LKHyS4htASl/>

Instagram: [authorroslynstclair](https://www.instagram.com/authorroslynstclair)

Author's Note: If you've enjoyed the Fated Archangels world in this Monster Brides Romance (and believe me, I am THRILLED to have been included in Monster Brides with all the wonderful, talented, creative, and inspired writers), please see the first chapter excerpt from Marked- Fated Archangels, Book One: Lucifer's Temptation in which the devil goes in search of a bride. Though he may not realize it, it will be the second time he falls...

Note on Triggers: Marked is a Dark Paranormal Romance, and although the first chapter doesn't contain anything too much worse than a kiss, if you have ANY triggers, this series will not be for you. It's Hell and he's the devil. Graphic sex, violence, dubious consent... etcetera.

And Follow Me: I'd be overjoyed if you left a positive review on any social site or purveyor of fine books – we authors really do live and die by reviews. If I were allowed to, I would beg for anything four stars and above. You know – if I was allowed

SNEAK PEEK

Excerpt from **Marked- Fated Archangels: Book One, Lucifer's Temptation**

****WINNER: FIRST PLACE MID-ATLANTIC AUTHOR SOCIETY,
PARANORMAL ROMANCE, 2023

*“Do not be afraid; our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.” Dante,
1265-1321*

CHAPTER ONE: Present Day: Assault and Jeopardy; March

There. He peered through the ethers as he strode the labyrinthic juts of his garden, ready to strike another name from his list when he stalled. A small thump sounded in his veins.

This one... she could be worth exploring. Something about her tasted like water: clean, fulsome, ready. Plus, he had always been a sucker for red hair and green eyes. Yes, this one he should meet.

Turning through the ethers, he clothed himself in a suit, bringing his glass of bourbon with him. He landed in the hotel tearoom and took a seat so he could study the latest candidate without interference. Something in his chest quickened as he watched her bask in the room's contentment. Even in person, she seemed strangely perfect.

Slowly, he resolved, allowing his body to take visibility...

The hotel tearoom glittered with conversation and small tinkling laughs. Wall-length mirrors refracted the light of numerous chandeliers and reflected the well-heeled assortment of Europeans and New York Society's old-school who decorated the gilded chairs like spring flowers colored in the season's latest fashions.

Everything about the room screamed of wealth and privilege. Rose, for a small time, was glad to borrow the peace that came with it.

She gazed about the space as her friends debated which painting at the exhibit they had just visited best typified Degas' true talent. Once a month, since college, the three of them met to do what they loved most: appreciate art and enjoy afternoon tea at the most decorous New York hotels they could find.

This one, The Parlor, was her personal favorite. In its splendor, she could forget her losses, though guilt, never far away, hovered in anticipation of settling again upon her shoulders once she left.

But as she enjoyed the room, an odd trickle of energy rippled over her skin, raising the small hairs on her arms. The atmosphere around her seemed to thicken before a strange, oppressive pressure compressed against her body. In the next instant, a mad swirl of shadow and light resolved across the sea of white-draped tables.

Directly in her sight-line.

From the middle of the storm, a well-dressed man materialized. He slouched negligently against the back of a chair she could swear had sat vacant only a second earlier. Piercing, bright blue eyes and a strange luminescence that sifted from beneath his skin slashed through the tangible shadows folded around him.

Releasing a glass of something golden, he trilled three long, tapered fingers. The odd, heavy sensation disappeared, but he remained.

Dark. Disturbingly direct. Apparently, unhampered by social norms as he stared straight at her without blinking.

The way his attention centered upon her slashed through to her bones. Shivers raced up her spine as her pulse skipped several beats. Inhaling roughly, she closed her eyes and held them closed longer than seemed wise as she tried to steady her imagination.

What on earth? Was she losing her mind?

But when she opened her eyes, he was still there. His brilliant blue gaze studied her as if he could see down to her very soul.

So she studied him back. He was beautiful. Raven hair, incredible blue eyes, dimpled chin, and chiseled features topped a body cut to perfection. Tall, lean, assured, and elegant, he lounged in his chair like it was some sort of throne, all tensile strength wrapped in a devastating serpentine swagger.

He crossed his legs. The motion brought the luxurious fabric of his suit into minute pleats. She followed the ripples along his angled planes and forgot to breathe.

Obviously, he hadn't appeared from thin air... but how had she not noticed him? He was too stunning to overlook. Then again, people didn't just appear as if by magic. She must have been daydreaming and missed the maître d' seating him. She must have imagined the atmospheric changes.

Releasing her breath, she unclenched her fingers, shifted upon her tufted seat, and forced her attention back to the tea caddy at the center of her table. Tiny quartered sandwiches rested upon the bottom plate, scones and pots of clotted cream and jam covered the middle round, and an array of delectable pastries lay along the uppermost. It all looked delicious— if only she could swallow.

“Hello? Rose?” Ellen snapped the air with the silver sandwich tongs.

Forcing her attention back to the petite brunette, Rose grabbed the implement and snagged a couple crustless quarters from the caddy. The slices tumbled to her plate as her hand trembled. Carefully, she set the tongs upon the tablecloth.

No. Don’t look at him. She was being ridiculous.

Still, a moment later, her gaze again slipped past Louise’s shoulder. The man’s excoriating blue eyes remained steady upon her. With a small smile, his lush lips folded around the rim of his glass.

She felt his mouth whisper against her neck in a long, sensuous slide.

Jerking from the unexpected sensation, she grappled for her jam knife and dropped it. The utensil clattered against the porcelain plate. Louise and Ellen swiveled their heads towards her, their disagreement interrupted.

“Sorry.” She murmured the word and looked away, every part of her electrified by the need to run. Or maybe, to sit very still, like a rabbit in the presence of a wolf, and hope the lupine would overlook her or mistake her for a cabbage. Taking another deep breath, she tried to get her racing pulse under control. What the hell was wrong with her?

She forced her attention back to her friends and tried to focus on their conversation, but her awareness zinged back to the ebony-haired man with his piercing blue eyes. His lips quirked into a devil’s smile. The strangely possessive expression whispered of dark bedrooms, velvet drapes, paddles on the walls, and... her... beneath him.

Every part of her tightened as panic twisted through her belly. Despite the way he held her fused to him like a magnet, she broke their connection.

Maybe her friends were right. Maybe she really was losing her mind.

Plus, she was being a fool. No man who looked like him would be interested in someone like her. If her life was any indication, most men found her unattractive, or not worth the effort. Only Scott had ever taken an interest, and she still wasn't sure how much she had drawn him as opposed to her parents. He had loved spending time with them.

With deliberation, she shook off her pity party of one. Anyway, she didn't really matter at the moment. What mattered was how the stranger unnerved her. Was he as dangerous as her body seemed to be trying to tell her?

Someone would be bound to notice if he sliced her throat. More than half the tea-partaking patrons gaped at him now, manners forgotten, but how could they not? He was stunning. He was lust on legs. He held attention like he owned both it and the world.

The ridiculous thought finally broke the spell. As her pulse steadied once more, she reached for one of the sandwich slices, but instead of grabbing it, her fingers fluttered to the edge of her plate and stroked the gilded edge. Maybe Louise and Ellen had been right when they suggested she should see a therapist. Her reaction to the debonair stranger was all out of sorts.

"Why aren't you eating?" Louise jutted her chin towards Rose's plate. "If you don't want your watercress, I'll take it. You can keep the salmon." She wrinkled her cute button nose below her enormous patrician blue eyes.

"Here." Rose pushed her plate closer to her friend. In doing so, she glanced over Louise's shoulder again at the man in the tailored dark suit.

In a gesture that seemed calculated to unnerve her, he winked.

It worked. Inhaling roughly, Rose choked and began to sputter. Reaching for her cup of Lapsang Souchong, she brought it to her lips and hid behind the cup. The smoky flavor helped settle her throat until she peeked back at him over the rim. A frown furrowed between his elegantly arched brows, as if she had confused him with her reaction.

“Rose, do you feel okay? You look kind of green.” Ellen leaned back in her chair, her shoulders touching the furniture for the first time since they had been seated. “Are we moving on to the scones even though you haven’t touched your sandwiches?”

Their tea ritual was every bit as choreographed as a ballet. In the studied order, they could ignore the chaos and uncertainty of the real world for an hour. Rose had always looked forward to their outings, but today...

She made an effort to smile at her friend. “I ate a big breakfast.” She nodded. “Scones. Let’s.”

Ellen regarded her from under beetled brows before she elbowed Louise. In return, Louise shrugged.

Ellen picked up her cup. “I knew we shouldn’t have let you go off to the Egyptian wing on your own. Really, Rose, you have to get a grip. Forget the past, okay? You’re never going to find someone decent if you won’t move on, and no one sensible wants to hear about Egyptian magic, soul-snatching, crystals, and no... whatever.” She circled her hand in the air as she lost the word, before sipping from her cup.

“Noetic science. I talk about other things, too.” But she pitched her voice low because the way her body screamed made her wonder for the first time if Ellen could be right. Maybe she had shifted slightly out of line with normal society, and her reaction to the handsome man was the result.

Besides, he probably stared at someone else over her shoulder, someone beautiful and elegant and assured. Someone not her.

Since Scott, her attention had been skewed to the paranormal as she searched for reasons and answers. Maybe it was no wonder she imagined handsome, perilous strangers ready to pounce.

Her attention flickered back to the elegant man. He had placed his drink upon the table while she spoke with her friends, and now his long fingers caressed the top of the glass. Still, he stared fixedly at her. Or someone

else behind her. Probably. Not that it mattered. He wasn't one of those decent men Ellen thought she should find.

No, he was too... too. Too graceful. Too handsome. Too... virile.

An uneasy hunger cramped her stomach as she pictured those dexterous fingers slipping along her skin like they stroked the crystal rim. Unlike Scott, the stranger would move with practiced ease, as unhurried and patient in taking what he wanted as he was sipping his drink. But would he make love to her, or stab her ten times and pick her gristle from between his teeth? Menace oozed from him like dark, sticky syrup, melding with the odd play of light and shadow sieving around him again.

But if she mentioned him to her friends, they would accuse her of attention-seeking. Worse, they would say she was imagining scenarios so she didn't have to deal with Scott's death, and shouldn't she have called a therapist by now?

She looked away and bit her lip, but when she peeked back, he leaned forward, his pose no longer indolent. The blue of his eyes flashed before they pierced through her flesh like blades. Sudden pain flared in a line down her front.

Gripping the chair arms, she bit her bottom lip between her teeth and willed herself not to scream. It took extraordinary effort. When the pain receded and she could move, she threw her napkin on the table and pushed back her chair. "I'll be— that is, I... I'll be back."

Ignoring the way her friends' eyes rounded, she hastened through to the lobby and turned right. A long hallway stretched to the bathroom. Halfway down the corridor, a soft rustle fluttered behind her. Spinning, she cried out and raised her hands in a defensive posture, but only empty space washed at her heels.

The thundering in her chest increased so she practically jogged the rest of the distance. Once inside the bathroom, she nodded at the gray-haired

attendant and sought the last sink at the far end. Turning the cold faucet full blast, she bowed over the stream and tried to steady her pulse. She wasn't usually so unnerved by men, or by catching second glances. It was part of having red hair and green eyes. Not too many people had her coloring, unless she wanted to decamp to Ireland where she could find ten of herself on every block. And anyway...

Anyway, it didn't matter where she tried to run. She wasn't going to outrun the guilt, and wasn't it the real reason she had become so overwhelmed by a stranger's stare?

A square of paper appeared in her peripheral vision, interrupting her thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she straightened and reached for the towel. "I'm sorry. I left my purse..." Her voice edged into a garbled cry as she scrabbled back from the very man she had tried to escape.

She didn't get far. The paper he held fluttered to the floor as he grabbed her wrist and yanked her hard against his muscled frame. Air whooshed from her lungs as her hips banged into his upper thighs. His free hand wrapped her at the waist, anchoring her so she couldn't pull away.

She pushed against his chest. He didn't budge in the slightest. He was stone all the way down.

A tiny mewl escaped her as she studied the room behind him, looking for the attendant, for another guest, anyone. They were all alone.

"Shh." His clasp tightened to the point of pain. "Be calm."

"C-calm?" The word stuttered and caught. She swallowed and checked behind him again before she dared to meet his excoriating gaze. Up close, his eyes were so bright, they burned like blue suns. "H-how did you get in here? Let me go!" She pushed again. Nothing.

"Settle. And please, don't scream. I despise sharp noises." His voice held a rumble of honey sticky enough to catch her attention. Dark, deep, and beguiling, the sound clung to clipped consonants and

precise, rounded vowels. She could get lost in its resonance. “Rose. You are lovely, aren’t you?” He examined her face, his gaze dropping down her neck.

“I-I am?” But her gut twisted and bottomed out. It took her a few moments to figure out why, but when she did, panic welled within her. His blue eyes blazed hotter, as if he read her mind.

He knew her name. She tried to think. Failed. Did she know him, too? Was he stalking her?

“Y-you shouldn’t... be in here.”

He laughed, the expression revealing even white teeth and rendering him impossibly beautiful. “Shouldn’t I?” His thumb stroked the tender skin of her wrist, sending fire points shooting through her body to land between her legs. As if he felt the sparking lightning he created, his smile grew broader. “Oh, I think you’ll do very well, Rose. It took a while to find you. I took my time. I wished to be certain.”

She opened her mouth, intending to scream, but all she could manage was a sort of inarticulate gurgle as his hand slipped around her back so his pinky pressed to the sensitive spot just above the crease of her buttocks. Liquid fire flowed through her in response. Instead of crying for help, she moaned.

Without the least hesitation, he covered her lips. His tongue slipped through to stroke with expert ease, drawing her out and into him. She tasted bourbon and something spicy-hot. Cinnamon, maybe. Definitely smoke.

But then she lost her ability to decipher his taste as he deepened the kiss, his lips flitting and demanding, pulling on hers until her body turned to sticky candy under the onslaught.

Another moan rose in her throat. He swallowed it. His fingers, the ones around her wrist, released and buried in her hair, pressing her mouth closer

still. He inhaled her, bruising her skin, until every part of her thrummed with wanting and she kissed him back with equal fervor.

He was delectable. He was like heady wine. It wasn't enough. She couldn't get enough. She pressed into him, her body aligning with his as if made in some special mold. A delicious languor eased through her limbs, all her senses focused upon his lips, the rippling muscles under her fingers, and the scent of his skin: smoky, woodsy-sweet, and exotic.

If not for him holding her upright, she would have puddled to his feet.

When he broke their embrace, he studied her as she panted and tried to retrieve her senses. But his smell— she wanted, needed, to inhale more of him, and so she leaned closer before she remembered she shouldn't. No, he was dangerous, predatory, and he appeared far less affected than she by their kiss, though his glowing blue eyes had softened.

Tracing her cheekbone with his thumb, his other hand removed from the sensitive spot at her buttocks to her hip. He squeezed gently, until, with reluctance written on his face, both his hands fell away. He took a half-step back.

She touched her vibrating lips. "Why?" Her voice emerged as a whisper.

"Because. You are mine." With infinite slowness, he ran the backs of his knuckles over her jawline, down her neck, and between her breasts. Bright sharp pain erupted at the spot where he paused. He dropped his hand and took another step backward. "Mine."

An ache of real fire burned like a brand. Pressing her palm over the spot, tears pricked her eyes. "What did you just do?"

"Staked my claim." A brief look of regret crossed his perfect features. "I'll grant you a few hours to put your affairs in order. Rose." He lifted her right hand and clasped it in both of his. Bringing it to his lips, he placed a gentle kiss upon her fingers in an elegant, courtly gesture. "I'll see you soon."

He stalked to the door. His gait held the tensed readiness of a jungle cat before a pounce. Sinuous. Sensual. Deadly. At the same time, he strode like he owned the world. As he passed the attendant who once again stood just inside the frame of the entrance, he paused. For a moment, Rose imagined he would stab the woman dead.

Instead, the gray-haired employee fell to the floor, her arms outstretched in front of her, her nose pressed to the tile. “Your Majesty.”

As if it was the most natural thing in the world, he angled one of his polished black shoes. In a lavish display of submission, she kissed the shiny leather over and over before he gently kicked her off. With a tilt of his head, he gazed over his shoulder. A small smile lifted his cushion lips before he disappeared.

He just... disappeared.

Rose sank to the ground as her legs gave out.